

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point



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CTC SENTINEL 100TH ISSUE: 15 YEARS SINCE 9/11



A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

John Brennan

DIRECTOR, CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

FEATURE ARTICLE

15 Years On, Where Are We in the 'War on Terror'?

BRIAN MICHAEL JENKINS

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FROM THE EDITOR

This September marks the 15th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. The terrible events of that day created an urgent need to better understand the threat of global terrorism. This was the founding mission of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, which was established by Brigadier General (Ret) Russ Howard in 2003, and its flagship publication *CTC Sentinel*, which was launched in 2007 with a mandate to publish the most illuminating research in the field of terrorism studies as well as gain insights from key figures combating terrorism. This 100th issue of *CTC Sentinel* focuses on the evolution of the terrorist threat since 9/11. It features an extensive interview with CIA Director John Brennan in which he outlines the spectrum of threats and counterterrorism challenges now facing the United States.

In our feature article, Brian Michael Jenkins looks at what progress has been made in the “war on terrorism.” He argues that counterterrorism efforts have made the United States safer, but with Europe facing an acute threat and the Middle East roiling from the fallout from the failed Arab Spring, there is no end in sight to a war that has cost trillions of dollars and as many as 10,000 American lives. There may, however, be an expiration date on the Islamic State’s caliphate project. With the group under growing pressure in Iraq and Syria, Jacob Shapiro argues that the caliphate’s “slow collapse” was predictable from day one given its inability to generate sufficient economic output and revenue to sustain governance and being greatly outgunned by the coalition of states arrayed against it.

While “core” al-Qa`ida has been degraded by counterterrorism operations, the broader network has shown resilience. Charles Lister outlines how Syria has become the new Afghanistan for al-Qa`ida, offering a safe haven in which the group has built up a powerful presence, while Anne Stenersen details how the group is making a comeback in the country from which it launched the 9/11 attacks. The logic behind those attacks was that only by severing U.S. support for “un-Islamic” regimes could al-Qa`ida hope to make any progress toward establishing a new order in the Arab and Muslim world. The opportunities now available in a destabilized Arab world means that the United States is not seen as so large of a roadblock and al-Qa`ida appears to have de-prioritized international attack planning, at least for now. To overthrow regimes in the Arab and Muslim world, Ayman al-Zawahiri has long viewed it essential that jihadis win the support of the Muslim masses, a strategy Lister argues has been embraced by al-Qa`ida’s Syrian affiliate, including in its recent uncoupling from its mother-organization in order to broaden its local support. Stenersen argues that in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region the same imperative has led al-Qa`ida to build up an affiliate focused on the Indian Subcontinent and led and staffed by operatives from the region.

Much credit for reaching the hundredth-issue milestone is due to Erich Marquardt, the founding editor of *CTC Sentinel*, who built the journal into a leading academic force during his seven years at its helm, as well as our current managing editor Kristina Hummel, CTC director Lieutenant Colonel Bryan Price and deputy Brian Dodwell, Colonel Suzanne Nielsen, Brigadier General Cindy Jebb, General (Ret) John Abizaid, Ambassador Michael Sheehan, the previous CTC leadership and editorial teams, as well as, of course, all our contributors. We hope to make *CTC Sentinel* even more of a must-read for anyone interested in these crucial subjects.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

Cover Art: The covers of all previous issues of the CTC Sentinel are featured over a photo of the Statue of Liberty against the New York City skyline and twin beams of light in remembrance of 9/11. (Art by Rami Moghadam; photo by Betty Wiley/Getty Images)

A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with John Brennan, Director, CIA

By Paul Cruickshank and Brian Dodwell

John O. Brennan was sworn in as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency on March 8, 2013. Previously, he served at the White House for four years as Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism. During that time, he advised President Obama on counterterrorism strategy and helped coordinate the U.S. Government's approach to homeland security. Mr. Brennan began his service in government at the CIA, where he worked from 1980 to 2005. His assignments included Chief of Station in the Middle East and later Deputy Executive Director. He led multi-agency efforts to establish the National Counterterrorism Center, which he became interim director of in 2004.

CTC: Much of the discourse surrounding the 9/11 anniversary tends to center around questions related to “Are we safer?” You’ve been on the record that our security has improved since that day. So if you look at it from the other side, specifically assessing the strength of our adversary on that day, al-Qa`ida, how would you assess their strength these days?

Brennan: Well, al-Qa`ida today is much different than it was on 9/11. Al-Qa`ida at that time was really based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, Afghanistan mostly. And I think what we have done since 9/11 is to dismantle a large part of that core al-Qa`ida organization that was based in Afghanistan and pushed it out, and now it’s scattered in that area. But we have other elements of al-Qa`ida that have sprung up—as you know, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula [AQAP], we have Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, al-Qa`ida in Syria. And you have al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb that is still out there. A lot of those elements of al-Qa`ida that have sprung up have really adopted much more of a localized agenda, so we see that there are several thousand al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula individuals, but they have been fighting mainly an insurgency down there. But there is still a very lethal terrorist element to it. Same thing with Jabhat al-Nusra; most of that is focused on trying to oust Assad. But we are concerned about their using Syria as a safe haven for attacks outside.

So over the last 15 years, al-Qa`ida has been diminished as a result of the great pressure that we’ve put on them in Af-Pak. However, they were able to gain some strength in some of these other areas. We now see that al-Qa`ida in Iraq has morphed into Daesh, or ISIL. So al-Qa`ida is still a very serious concern and threat, and the core of al-Qa`ida—[current al-Qa`ida leader Ayman] al-Zawahiri and others of that ilk—still think of the West as the major enemy. And as we know from looking at some of the things that came out of [Usama bin Ladin’s] Abbottabad compound, I think bin Ladin was very concerned about how many Muslims had died at the hands of al-Qa`ida and believed it was really tarnishing their brand and their purpose. So I do believe that they consider the United States to be a principal target.

That said, given what we have done here since 9/11, the United

States is a much less hospitable environment for terrorists to ply their trade. And it’s more difficult for them to do it. This doesn’t mean that there’s still not ways to do it, but al-Qa`ida itself is a much different organization than on 9/11. In some respects, it is less dangerous than it was because we’ve taken away a lot of the capability of that core, but in other respects, it maintains the lethality that if it puts its mind to it, it still can carry out attacks with devastating consequences.

CTC: What is the intelligence picture with regard to al-Qa`ida attempting to move back into Afghanistan on the coattails of the Taliban?

Brennan: Well I think if we believe that a lot of al-Qa`ida migrated into Pakistan over the last 15 years, they haven’t done too well there. And I think they are still searching for a place where they can feel more secure, and there are areas inside of Afghanistan that they believe may provide greater security because the Taliban may control certain areas. I think it’s only going to be a temporary respite from the counterterrorism pressures that they’re feeling. We see the number of Afghan forces that have died in combat going up. Yes, that’s a reflection of increased fighting, but it also shows that it’s Afghans who are fighting for their country once again. So if al-Qa`ida decides to move over into Afghanistan, I think they do so with some trepidation as well as uncertainty about what their future’s going to hold.

CTC: What is your assessment of the July decoupling announcement between al-Qa`ida and Jabhat al-Nusra and the latter’s rebranding as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham?

Brennan: I believe that given that there has been a fair amount of press about efforts by the United States and Russia and others to try to prevent Syria from becoming a new safe haven for al-Qa`ida via Jabhat al-Nusra, I think they recognized that that moniker is a liability. And I do not believe that that name change is going to really change the focus of this organization, which has been primarily to carry out offenses against pro-regime forces. I am concerned that there still remains a very worrisome element of Jabhat al-Nusra that will be wrapped maybe in this new name but will still have external plotting as its purpose. So I do think it’s purely a change of name but not really a change in orientation, purpose, agenda, and objectives.

CTC: Is there a concern that it may help the group further embed itself in the local context by building alliances with other groups like Ahrar al-Sham?

Brennan: Maybe marginally, but I think only marginally because if we take a look at what has happened on the battlefield inside of Syria, there is a lot of collaboration among the different stripes of oppositionists. So Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham never had really any aversion to collaborating with one another. And Jabhat

al-Nusra was able also to have tactical battlefield cooperation with groups that were even in the moderate side of the spectrum. Given that they are fighting a common enemy—Syria and its backers—there has been significant interaction among them to date. So I think the name change will really not affect that much. We'll have to see how this develops over time. Since the name change was announced, the rank-and-file of Jabhat al-Nusra, will have been thinking, "What does this mean? Do we do anything differently?" And I don't think they are going to do anything differently.

CTC: Do you think it has any impact on the nature of the conflict between Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State?

Brennan: Of all the groups in Syria, we've seen probably the least collaboration and cooperation between Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra because they've become visceral enemies. And I think that reflects the Julani-Abu Du'a personal enmity^a that really has led to this fracturing within the organization. When they confront one another, they can fight bitter battles. I do not believe that this name change is going to affect that relationship—positively or negatively—at this time.

CTC: Speaking more broadly then about the nature of the conflict and relationship between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida,

^a Director Brennan is referring to the conflict between Jabhat al-Nusra leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani and Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (also known as Abu Du'a).

there's been this ongoing debate in the analytical community about who's stronger, who's weaker, who's gaining in influence in the jihadist community. Can you comment on which entity you think has the upper hand, either in the short-term or long-term?

Brennan: I think just in terms of pure numbers and global presence, influence, and impact, ISIL has surpassed al-Qa`ida due to the resonance it has among the extremist terrorist community, their reach, their activity, their operational cadence. I think because of all of that, the Islamic State has the upper hand. There is, I think, some competition that's going on. I wouldn't be surprised if al-Qa`ida was looking for ways to regain some prominence, not just with these localized wars we're talking about but also doing some things outside. But I do think the balance is very much in ISIL's favor at this time.

CTC: Would that be reflected in terms of how you rank them regarding direct threats to U.S. national security, either in the homeland or U.S. interests abroad?

Brennan: I would put ISIL much higher on the operational cadence scale as well as on the span of activity and the numbers of individuals who might, in fact, be used to carry out an attack against U.S. interests, whether it be in the region, whether it be in Europe, or whether it be over here. And their activity in the digital environment is also very extensive, creating greater prospects for carrying out attacks. They have been, I think, very sophisticated in their use of that digital domain, more sophisticated than al-Qa`ida. I think



CIA Director John Brennan with President Barack Obama (Pete Souza/White House)

partly that's because of their age. If I were to look at the average age of ISIL members as opposed to al-Qa`ida, there's probably a difference there. It's much younger in ISIL, and the younger you are these days, the more adept you are at being able to use very sophisticated and leading-edge apps for your activity.

CTC: What's the current assessment of the Islamic State's capability to put together international terrorist attacks?

Brennan: I think what they have demonstrated is the ability to put together a diversified investment portfolio, for lack of a better term. So it runs the gamut in terms of types of things that they're trying to gain traction with. Whether it be the incitement that they can generate in the digital domain, motivating people who have had no interaction with their organization, or ever traveled maybe outside of their home community, all the way up to things that they're trying to do in terms of moving operatives that have experience on the battlefields of Syria and training and directing them to be part of refugee or migrant flows, or finding ways to get into countries or return to their home countries and carry out attacks.

So it is the span of ISIL's efforts that have led me to believe that they're really not putting all their eggs in one basket and that their external operations group, which is based mainly in Syria in the Raqqa area, is really trying to generate activity. And we also see the increasing interaction between that external operations element and some of their franchises, whether it be Islamic State in West Africa, also known as Boko Haram, or inside the Sinai in Egypt or in South Asia. We see that interaction in terms of trying to get people to generate activity as a way to make sure that ISIL stays in the headlines and is seen as *the* premier group to attract the support of future adherents to terror.

CTC: Some of the interrogations of some Europeans who were part of the group suggest that the efforts on the external operations front were pretty ad hoc perhaps when compared to al-Qa`ida before 9/11 where there was a much more organized, sophisticated effort. Are you seeing increased sophistication when it comes to trying to put together these big plots against Europe and elsewhere?

Brennan: I think what I've seen in ISIL is that their ability to carry out some type of operation or attempt an operation takes place in a much more compressed timeframe than al-Qa`ida's traditional way. You look at 9/11 and other major attacks, and it was very deliberate, methodical, a lot of planning went into it. I think ISIL tries to move from idea to bang within months or within weeks, again trying to take advantage of some opportunities that are out there. And although I am concerned that they are looking for attacks that could have strategic consequences, they see that the attacks in Paris and in Nice and other areas that can kill scores, through the actions of as few as one person, can be as effective and maybe even more psychologically damaging. So I do believe that that investment portfolio is one that looks at near-term returns as opposed to long-term returns. But I think they do have a smattering of it all.

CTC: And the type of training that they're able to provide these European, Western recruits, and other recruits, compared to the tradecraft al-Qa`ida was able to impart on their operatives, say in Afghanistan, how does that compare, specifically with regard to bomb-making and operational security, encryption, and other related skills?

Brennan: Well, again, looking back over the last 15 years, there has been tremendous advances in technology, even tremendous advances in the fabrication of IEDs, in terms of going into the non-metallic realm, going into the increasing miniaturization of IEDs and different kinds of concealment methodologies. What we see also with ISIL is, given the large number of individuals that have come from Europe, these are individuals who typically have been on the fringe of society, were criminals, and were part of criminal gangs, and also have insight and access to a lot of the black markets, the grey markets that would sell weapons or other types of materiel. And they've been able to tap into that.

But al-Qa`ida really tried to compartmentalize what they were trying to do. They didn't trust a lot of these other networks. They were always concerned mostly with the compartmentalization because they didn't want their activity to be exposed. ISIL has a much more free-wheeling attitude. Ad hoc is a good way to say it. It's whatever you can do to get to that bang as soon as possible, and if you kill only a couple, for them that's okay. So again, it's just trying to move things into the execution stage sooner. This has created significant challenges for the intelligence community. Al-Qa`ida, by contrast, was much more deliberate and still is much more deliberate as far as its external planning is concerned.

CTC: There's been speculation the recent uptick of attacks in the West is linked to the increased pressure the Islamic State has been under in Iraq and Syria. Is that connection there? Or is that something they were always trying to do? Can we attach any type of strategic vision to these endeavors?

Brennan: In some respects, they're similar to a startup in the business world. Their numbers in Iraq were down to 600 to 800 or so after they were pummeled by the U.S. military and others. They had very limited capability. And then all of a sudden, as a result of things that were going on inside of Iraq and Syria, they regained momentum. And they grew exponentially, which then led to the separation between ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra.

They were focused initially on local targets, and what ISIL had that al-Qa`ida really never had was a real anti-Shia engine. It was against the governments in both Baghdad and Damascus and was driven by that sectarian dimension. Once it got rolling, just like a startup organization that grows up quickly and has a lot more employees, it then started to diversify its business activity. And so that external operations element was almost a natural outgrowth of the growth of the organization itself. And so about a year and a half ago or two years ago, that's when they really started to assign assets to focus on the external operations element to build a capability. And building that capability took some time.

Initially, I think there was a fair amount of gravitation to that activity by the foreign fighters who were from the U.K., France, and elsewhere. And it just grew and developed, and now it's much more capable. It is developing some of those ad hoc opportunities, but also investing in things that will take time to develop. So I do think this is something that has happened over time.

I do not believe it is intended to offset their setbacks on the battlefield as some think. I think this has an engine of its own, and they want to have this type of prominence. They want to have this type of global reach. Might some of the setbacks in the battlefield encourage some to work harder to have some type of victory so that the headlines focus there? Sure. But I think that has an engine of its own. Even if they were successful in the battlefield, I think we would

see the same type of activity going forward externally.

CTC: Given the Islamic State's deep financial pockets, does the intelligence community need to think outside the box in terms of what the group could be capable of moving forward?

Brennan: Well, we try not to limit ourselves. I do disagree with the 9/11 Commission, which said it was a failure of imagination. I think CT officers, CT professionals are always thinking about what is it this group could try to do against us.

So how diabolical can they get? Well, attacking the streets of Paris was pretty diabolical. Is there something that they're cooking up in some back room somewhere? We see that they've used chemical weapons on the battlefield, in terms of some of their production capabilities there. That's more of a localized battlefield impact. I would not put anything past these individuals who are so depraved and are dedicated to mayhem and carnage.

CTC: What is your assessment of the state of jihadism in North Africa? Libya is often cited as the location of one of the Islamic State's stronger provinces outside of the Levant, although more recently they've been under a lot more pressure there. What is your assessment of how they're going to respond to this increased pressure and what role does Libya hold for the organization?

Brennan: What Libya holds is a fair amount of ungoverned space and a lack of any type of government or rule of law that can be felt throughout the country. But there are a lot of other places in North Africa and the Sahel that are of concern, too. One of the things that they've been able to capitalize on is they haven't had to go in and create startups and find people. What they did was, again using a business analogy, mergers and acquisitions. So Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in Sinai all of a sudden became ISIL in the Sinai and the same thing with a lot of Ansar al-Sharia elements and al-Qa`ida remnants within Libya all of a sudden becoming ISIL there. And, of course, Boko Haram in Nigeria.

They've been able to capitalize on existing elements that were brought together because of this distorted and perverted view of what a religion calls them to do. I think there are fertile grounds there and throughout the African continent, in areas where corruption is rampant and governments often lack the ability to care for the basic needs of the people. And unfortunately, over the years, there really have not been secular, political movements that have attracted the disaffected and disenfranchised. It is the supposedly religiously based organizations with a very extremist ideology that have attracted individuals. And these groups, ISIL and others, have money and they can give food and weapons, shelter and camaraderie to individuals who have no other purpose (at least they think) in life. And so, even though we've pushed back ISIL in Syria and Iraq, the phenomenon that has been able to take advantage of a lot of these conditions, is still something that I don't think we've been able to reverse.

CTC: One of the interesting things about the mergers and acquisitions model that you raise is the fact that these entities come with pre-existing relationships, histories, and objectives.

Brennan: And networks and financing.

CTC: Absolutely. It seems that the farther afield you get from the so-called caliphate, the more willing some of these entities

are to work with groups that are otherwise competitors. And so when you look at the landscape of jihadist actors in North Africa, what is the potential for some of these groups, al-Qa`ida affiliates and Islamic State affiliates, to be more cooperative than they would be in the Levant?

Brennan: Absolutely, I think the farther away you get from that heartland of Syria and Iraq, the more likely you're going to see collaboration between al-Qa`ida elements, ISIL elements, and others. We see it right now in Yemen. The number of al-Qa`ida elements in Yemen dwarfs the number of ISIL elements. But there are indications that, in fact, they're working together. Because if you have a common enemy, unless there are some real serious organizational tensions, you don't have that same type of separation in these other theaters.

CTC: What kind of cooperation are you detecting between ISIL and al-Qa`ida adherents inside Yemen?

Brennan: Well, we don't see the fighting taking place between them. It's the absence of that obvious tension that you see inside of Syria in places where Jabhat al-Nusra and Daesh are abutting one another. With the push that the Emiratis have made with the Yemeni government to push al-Qa`ida out of Mukalla, which is a large port city and was their center, they've moved into areas now where ISIL had some initial traction and support. Given that both ISIL and al-Qa`ida are now both fighting not just the Emiratis and the Yemeni military but also the Houthis and elements of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh's group, there is a commonality of local interest. So what we see is cooperation on the tactical level in terms of their pushing back against their common domestic enemies. We'll have to see whether or not that type of collaboration or non-confrontation is going to translate into collaboration on the external plotting side. I have not seen that.

CTC: What concerns you about the evolution of the jihadist threat in Yemen and Saudi Arabia?

Brennan: I think some of the individuals inside of Saudi Arabia that were prone to extremist sentiment and ideology were previously migrating toward the al-Qa`ida side of the spectrum, but are now very easily attracted to the ISIL side. And so ISIL has been able to capitalize on some of this sentiment. But the Saudis have very capable internal services. And although there have been some recent bombings, the Saudis have been able to prevent many more



Director Brennan engages cadets during a visit to the United States Military Academy at West Point. (CIA)

attacks than have taken place.

When it comes to Yemen, as long as the group still maintains al-Qa`ida in its name, I think we have to assume that there's something that they're planning against the West. They have suffered a number of setbacks because of just the internal turbulence inside of Yemen. But their master bomb maker Ibrahim al-Asiri is still at large. He is very sophisticated in terms of his concealment capabilities as well. I would not say for a minute that we aren't worried about what AQAP might be planning to do. But a lot has happened inside of Yemen that I think has distracted or diluted maybe their path toward carrying out these attacks.

CTC: There's been a lot of discussion and speculation about the nature of the relationship between the Islamic State and Boko Haram after the announcement of them becoming Wilayat West Africa. Some of the more recent discussion has been about a potential split within the organization.^b What ties have you seen and what tangible benefits did Boko Haram get from this merger, or were they more limited?

Brennan: I would have to question if the Boko Haram that's now the Islamic State of West Africa really has benefited from that. I think they were hoping to benefit from it. There may have been some monies, and there's a brand that may have attracted some. But as you point out, there are some serious fissures within that organization now, and they are, in many respects, at each other's throats. Some of this relates to individuals within the organizations who want to be ascendant, and it's a personality issue and a conflict over who has command and control over the group. But I have not seen a great accrual of benefit to the Boko Haram organization from that association with ISIL.

CTC: Can you speak about the effectiveness of target killings as a CT tool and the impacts that has on the mortality of terrorist organizations? You and many other senior officials have talked about the fact that we can't kill our way out of this conflict. Yet targeted killings remains a key pillar of our CT activities, presumably because it is seen as a valuable tool.

Brennan: Well, there are different types of individuals that play an important role in generating these types of terrorist attacks. You have the senior-most leaders. You have the bin Ladins, the Zawahiris, and others. You have the operational commanders. You have individuals who might be leading cells. And these are sometimes the brainchilds, the engineers, the orchestrators, the directors, and if they're removed from the battlefield, then it has a dislocating impact on their operations. We have worked very closely with a lot of our partners to remove senior members of these terrorist organizations. I think one of the reasons we made such progress against al-Qa`ida core is because so many of those individuals who were part of that leadership team are no longer with us. And it has had a very disruptive impact on the organization.

We were talking about Yemen before, Zawahiri's former deputy was [Nasir] al-Wuhayshi, who was also the head of AQAP. He was removed from the battlefield, and I do think that has had an impact

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on their ability to prosecute their efforts domestically as well as internationally. So we see that it is a setback. What we have found is if you take out a number of those leaders in fairly rapid succession, it can have an exponential impact in terms of dislocating the group. I think this is particularly important over the past dozen years or so as a lot of these terrorist organizations recognize that they are vulnerable to being attacked and that their communications are vulnerable to potential intercept, they have had to practice much greater operational security.

And so they have cutouts and more couriers than ever before. By doing that, it extends the timeline of any operational activity. You remove people from that network, you disrupt it, and it takes a while to repair it. So one of the objectives of counterterrorism professionals is to delay operations, to try to disrupt them, to push it off. Because the more you can disrupt and delay, the more opportunity you have to uncover and then thwart. So I think by taking people out of that chain of command, you really do disrupt things and you cause turbulence. And when you cause turbulence, sometimes you cause movement and mistakes on the part of the organization that you can take advantage of.

CTC: You recently commented that you questioned whether or not Syria could be put back together again. Would you attach that same statement to Iraq? How would you see the political future of Iraq?

Brennan: When I'm looking out in the future, I don't know whether or not Syria and Iraq can be put back together again. There's been so much bloodletting, so much destruction, so many continued, seething tensions and sectarian divisions. I question whether we will see, in my lifetime, the creation of a central government in both of those countries that's going to have the ability to govern fairly. I could see some type of federal structure, so you have a central government but you're also going to have maybe autonomous regions.

A lot depends on what happens in the next three to four years. But I don't know whether we're going to see central governments in either one of those countries that are going to have the same type of control. In some respects, we don't want the central governments in both countries to have the same type of control because it was authoritarian, repressive control that was the reason why we're facing the challenges we are now.

But to have representative governments, something akin to a

^b Indicative of this split, the Islamic State has announced a change of leadership in Wilayat West Africa. See Dionne Searcey, "Boko Haram Leader Speaks on YouTube, Deepening Signs of Split," *New York Times*, August 4, 2016.

Western-style democracy, is going to be difficult. We saw with the Arab Spring, people, including here in the United States, optimistically thinking, “Well, if you just move out those authoritarian leaders, democracy is going to flourish, and people will welcome the opportunity to have a fully participatory political system.” That ain’t the way it turned out.

CTC: What are the challenges going to be with taking back Mosul and Raqqa from the Islamic State?

Brennan: They’re dense urban environments. We’ve seen how difficult it was to liberate Manbij from Daesh, a city that was maybe 180,000 or so before the conflict started. You look at Raqqa, much larger than that, a very dense urban environment. Mosul, over a million. Will ISIL leave or will they hunker down and fight? And if they’re going to hunker down and fight, you’re going to have really difficult urban fighting that could lead to a lot of deaths, and there’s still a large number of civilians there, some kept hostage by ISIL.

It’ll be interesting to see how those civilians are going to react once there is an effort to liberate both those cities. I do think that there is going to be some bandwagon momentum once things really start to go south for ISIL. You’ll see more of the tribes in the area try to join a winner. I think a lot of them joined ISIL because they saw that they were winning. But now that that’s reversed, I think you’re going to see a fair amount of individuals who are going to flee ISIL.

CTC: How do you see the future threat from foreign fighters coming out of Syria and Iraq?

Brennan: Those not killed in the fighting are going to present a challenge for our governments for years to come. The numbers are just astronomical in terms of the thousands upon thousands of individuals that have gone in there. And will they be able to put their violent past behind them? A lot depends on sort of where they go and whether they feel as though they can be a part of society again. Was it just a temporary psychopathic journey that they can come out of?

CTC: How good a picture does your organization now have of the ISIL leadership, their modus operandi, and their organization?

Brennan: It’s still a difficult target. I would say it’s still a hard target given where they’re operating. But we have I think a much better picture than we did before. Do we have a sufficient picture? No. We need to have a good understanding, a better understanding of what is happening upstream, inside the Raqqas, the Mosuls, whatever else, and who’s who and what they’re doing and where they are so we can give our coalition partners the information they need in order to continue to prosecute this effort.

We need to understand who is downstream and the locations where they may be planning attacks. And then we need to know

everything in between. It’s that area in between, that mid-stream, I think, that’s particularly important because that’s the area that we’re going to have the best chance to interdict and stop individuals as they move out—whether they’re moving out physically or whether they’re moving out in that digital environment. We need to be able to stop them before they get to the point where they already have acquired the gun or the automatic weapon in, say, Brussels. Once they get there, once they get into the execution window, the opportunity to stop them really narrows.

CTC: Is there one CT-related issue that has not been addressed appropriately in the public discourse or one issue that we should be thinking more about?

Brennan: There’s an understandable focus on the terrorists that are out there, the threat that they pose, and what we have done as a country to protect ourselves. What I think gets less attention and deserves much more are the people who actually carry out these counterterrorism activities and operations, from the collectors who are out there, to the analysts, to the experts that are informing our coalition partners. The CT professionals that are in the homeland security, intelligence, law enforcement, and military environments are some of the best and brightest, which is why, although I have concerns about what we’re still facing on the terrorism front, I have every confidence that we as a country are going to prevail. But it is going to take a while.

We’re facing a very challenging threat, but international cooperation is now stronger than it’s ever been before, particularly since ISIL reared its ugly head. Al-Qa`ida really presented a threat to the United States and maybe a couple of our allies. At the time, we’d go overseas and generate support in terms of what we were doing, but a lot of times their heart wasn’t in it because they weren’t in the crosshairs. Now, with the global phenomenon of ISIL and the fact that it has affected all of our lives in many respects due to events such as Paris, the environment has changed.

I give the example of even China, which is very concerned because the turbulence that has been created by terrorism is really disruptive to a lot of their economic and commercial interests. For example, they had to bring out thousands of Chinese workers out of Africa. So there is much more of a vested interest on the part of a lot of countries now to try to deal with what they see as this global terrorism problem. They’re really trying to understand what they can do and how they can play a role in the international architecture, and help ensure that we can share information very quickly so that we can stop a terrorist from carrying out an attack. I have regular discussions with our foreign partners, who are thirsting for more information but also for more training and more capability. And I think they see CIA and our intelligence partners as being the gold standard. I feel good about that. **CTC**

Fifteen Years On, Where Are We in the “War on Terror”?

By Brian Michael Jenkins

Measuring progress in irregular warfare without frontlines is always difficult. The various dimensions and multiple fronts of the United States’ ongoing campaign against terrorists make it an exceptional challenge. And much has changed since that campaign began 15 years ago. There has not been another 9/11-scale event. Although they attract followers, neither al-Qa`ida nor its progeny has become a mass movement. The constellation of groups claiming allegiance to them is far from an effective alliance, and the Islamic State has been contained. The leaders of al-Qa`ida depend heavily on exhortation to get others to fight, and the turnout is thin. On the other side of the ledger, the targeted groups have survived, their determination seems undiminished, and their ideology remains powerful. They are deeply embedded in a number of fragile, divided, conflict-ridden states. Persistent foes, they are able to operate underground and capable of comebacks if pressure on them subsides. The conflict will go on.

In December 2001, during testimony before a Senate Armed Services subcommittee, I was asked, “Mr. Jenkins, it has been three months since 9/11 and nothing more has happened. Are we through it yet?” I am certain that the senator was asking whether we were past the immediate danger of another 9/11-scale attack—the nation’s biggest fear—but I responded that this was likely to be a long contest lasting many years. Nearly 15 years on, we are not through it yet.

Nor is it clear how much further we have to go, although that is not surprising. Long wars have no signs telling us how many miles remain to the destination. The armies of Central Europe did not know in 1633 that they were halfway through the Thirty Years War. We will not know how close to (or far from) the end we were until the war is over.

But suppose I had been cursed with Cassandra’s powers of prophecy, and I had told the senators in 2001 that 15 years into the “Global War on Terror” (GWOT)—later called the more anodyne “Overseas Contingency Operations”—the United States would still be pursuing al-Qa`ida and its progeny, a dismaying reality, even

though analysts at the time anticipated a long campaign.

Calling it the “long war” was disapproved at the same time the GWOT label was shelved, yet the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq have become the two longest wars in U.S. history. The effort has now occupied two U.S. presidents, each serving two four-year terms, and there is no question that President Obama will turn over command of the campaign to the next president.

Use of the term “war” created unrealistic expectations. Americans see warfare as a finite undertaking, but conflicts of this nature can go on for many years. It took the British a quarter-century to suppress the Irish Republican Army’s (IRA) terrorist campaign. Afghanistan’s current internal conflicts have continued in one form or another since at least the early 1970s—and some would assert even longer. Colombia’s insurgency has gone on for a half-century. Al-Qa`ida declared war on the United States in 1996, 20 years ago, but our jihadist foes see the struggle as one that began centuries ago and that will continue until Judgment Day. Some in the United States warn of an unending war.

The senators in 2001 would have been more pleased to hear that by 2016, America’s terrorist foes had not been able to launch another 9/11-scale attack—they had not even come close. Indeed, under a broad definition of “terrorism” that includes attacks by angry, sometimes mentally unstable individuals who embrace jihadist ideology only to rationalize their aggression, jihadist terrorists since 9/11 have managed to kill fewer than 100 people in the United States—all needless tragedies to be sure, but an average of six or seven jihadist-inspired murders a year in a country with an annual average of 14,000 to 15,000 homicides is a far better outcome than many people had feared in 2001.

The effort has come at a heavy cost. As of August 2016, the death toll for American military personnel in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Freedom’s Sentinel in Afghanistan stands at 2,383. Adding the 4,504 U.S. military deaths incurred in the Iraq War, which was portrayed by some in government and viewed by most Americans as an extension of the war on terror, raises the toll to nearly 7,000. Reports vary, but an estimated several thousand American civilian contractors also have been killed in the two wars, bringing the total to somewhere around 10,000. Another approximately 50,000 American military personnel have been wounded in the two wars.^a Estimates of the total costs come to somewhere

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^a These military casualty numbers are derived from the U.S. Department of Defense and iCasualties.org. The total number of fatalities varies slightly between the two sources. The estimate of civilian contractor deaths comes from the Defense Base Act Compensation Blog.

between \$4 trillion and \$6 trillion.^b Would the senators have considered these costs to protect the homeland acceptable?

How Do We Measure Success?

Americans are pragmatists who want to see a return on their investments. And they are impatient. By now, we should have results, or at the very least, signs of progress. Are we winning or losing? Without frontlines, how do we measure? What do we count?

Progress is difficult to assess in this type of contest. There are no obvious metrics. Warfare itself has increasingly become a matter of manipulating perceptions. This is especially true in the realm of terrorism. Terrorist attacks are designed to be dramatic events, calculated to capture attention and create alarm, which will cause people to exaggerate the strength of the terrorists and the threat they pose.

The public sees every terrorist attack as a failure, a battle lost. Moreover, progress in degrading terrorists' operational capabilities, slowing terrorist recruiting, or impeding terrorists' financing seems slow, is not easily portrayed, and remains emotionally unsatisfying in the face of terrorist outrages. A framework of war allows for the possibility that the adversary will fight back, but every terrorist attack is seen as proof that counterterrorism efforts are not working.

Credibility is another problem. Premature claims by U.S. officials that suggest the mission has been accomplished or that the United States is within reach of defeating al-Qa`ida have eroded government credibility.

And in today's highly partisan political environment, every attack is portrayed as evidence that the administration is incompetent, negligent, or worse. Every claim of progress is challenged. The political debate contributes to the atmosphere of fear.

Rising Totals of Terror Events Are Misleading

Even as the United States has waged war on terrorists, the total volume of terrorism worldwide, according to public databases, has increased since 2001. Is that evidence of failure?

Terrorism may increase or decrease for reasons that have nothing to do with current U.S. efforts to destroy specific terrorist groups. Some of the increase reflects better reporting. Also, in recent decades, terrorist tactics have become a mode of armed conflict that comes with warfare. As we engage terrorists militarily, they fight back with terrorist tactics. These attacks reflect the nature and intensity of the conflict; they are not necessarily a measure of counterterrorism failure.

If the United States were not pursuing these groups, they would have fewer opportunities to strike back, but that is no different from saying that American military efforts against the Axis Powers during World War II were responsible for the thousands of Amer-

ican soldiers killed in that conflict. And the presumption behind U.S. action against the terrorists is that since they have attacked the United States, they will continue to attack if the United States does not go after them. Leaving terrorists alone buys no immunity.

The Goalposts Have Moved

Assessments of progress also depend on how objectives are defined. In a long war, the objectives may change over time. The paramount concern immediately after the 9/11 attacks was the prevention of another attack on that scale or worse. U.S. efforts have thus far succeeded in this. But the aim was also to ultimately destroy the enterprise responsible for 9/11 for reasons of prevention, justice, and deterrence of other groups that might harbor similar intentions. Some progress has been achieved in this effort.

But soon after the war on terror began, U.S. officials began talking about taking down *all* terrorist groups that had American blood on their hands or that might pose a threat to U.S. security. Enlisting allies in America's war on terror required including the terrorist organizations that threatened them as enemies. What began as a narrowly defined campaign against al-Qa`ida and its Taliban protectors soon turned into a broader campaign against a host of groups scattered across the globe.

In Afghanistan and other countries where jihadist banners have been raised, chasing terrorists has morphed into more ambitious counterinsurgency campaigns. Drone strikes and special operations make a purely counterterrorist effort possible, but these do not permanently alter the political landscape to eliminate potential terrorist strongholds.

U.S. officials today speak variously of destroying the most dangerous terrorist adversaries, protecting those in peril, preventing terrorist atrocities, denying terrorists safe havens, fixing failing states, filling ungoverned spaces, countering violent extremism, altering the conditions that contribute to radicalization and recruitment to violence, and attacking the root causes of terrorism. Attempting to achieve such aims guarantees a struggle lasting generations and a lot of frustrations.

The question most often asked by Americans is, "Are we safer now?" If the primary measure of progress is to make Americans safer, the authorities have done extremely well. Cooperation among intelligence services and law enforcement organizations worldwide has made the terrorists' operating environment more hostile, while federal investigators and local police have uncovered and thwarted approximately 90 percent of the jihadist terrorist plots in the United States.^c The risk of death at the hands of terrorists in the United States approaches lottery-winning odds. Add to that the fact that the annual rate of murders has fallen by 10,000 since the early 1990s, and the United States is a decidedly safer place.

Popular perceptions, however, are different. A spectacular terrorist attack—especially as terrorists increasingly focus their efforts on killing people in restaurants, train stations, airport terminals,

^b A number of academic studies have been published including a 2013 report by Linda J. Bilmes of Harvard University's Kennedy Center, which estimated the total projected costs of the two conflicts at more than \$4 trillion, including future costs of caring for veterans and paying interest on borrowed money. Bilmes, "The Financial Legacy of Iraq and Afghanistan: How Wartime Spending Decisions Will Constrain Future National Security Budgets," Harvard Kennedy School, March 2013. Obviously much depends on what costs are included. In a 2015 report for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Anthony H. Cordesman estimated the total cost of the two wars at between \$4 and \$6 trillion. Cordesman, "The FY2016 Defense Budget and U.S. Strategy, Key Trends and Data Points," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 6, 2015.

^c According to the author's own research, there have been between 80 and 90 homegrown jihadist terrorist plots in the United States since the 9/11 attacks. This total excludes externally mounted attacks like the 2001 attempt to sabotage an airliner bound for the United States via a shoe bomb or the 2009 sabotage attempt by Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the so-called underwear bomber. Of these, only nine plotters were not intercepted before carrying out their attack. There were a few other cases where jihadist inspiration blended with mental illness.



The twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001 (Henny Ray Abrams/AFP/Getty Images)

tourist spots, supermarkets, nightclubs, music concerts, sports arenas, shopping malls, sidewalk promenades, churches, and other public places—makes the point that no one is safe. The random quality of the violence means that risk is everywhere.

No Agreement on the Nature of the Enemy

The problem is not just that there are differing objectives. There is also debate about the identity of the adversary. Is it limited to the specific organizations described in the original authorization for the use of military force passed by the Congress, which later included those entities that became al-Qa`ida affiliates? The enemies list has since been expanded to include the Islamic State, a rebellious offshoot of al-Qa`ida, which brought in those professing loyalty to its leader. Must the United States therefore do something about Nigeria's Boko Haram? Some, however, would say that the desire to remain politically correct prevents even naming the enemy—Islamic radicalism, the fundamentalist ideology that fuels the violence. Some go further and assert that it is Islam itself that must be confronted.

The changing political environment has brought in additional foes. According to some critics of current efforts, the United States should have employed military force to topple Bashar al-Assad in Syria and to bring down the nuclear-minded mullahs in Iran. Doing so, they assert, would have denied Iran and Russia any capability or opportunity to get in the way of the United States' current efforts to destroy the Islamic State and other jihadist groups.

The Fear Remains

News coverage inflates the threat. Pundits offer competing visions of imminent doom. Assessments are driven not by what terrorists

have done, but rather by what people fear they might do. Americans tend to be obsessed with decline and doom. To some extent, it seems that fears of terrorism condense broader national anxieties.

While to a certain extent, American apprehension about terrorism reflects the latest news headlines, terror operates in its own universe. According to a series of polls,¹ one month after the 9/11 attacks, 41 percent of Americans said they thought it very likely that there would be another terrorist attack against the United States in the next several weeks. This percentage dropped over the years and remained low, often in single digits, until December 2015, when it jumped back to 33 percent. When asked in March if they worried about the possibility of a terrorist attack in the United States, 48 percent of Americans said they worried "a great deal."²

External Events Altered Strategic Calculations

The world does not stand still. In long wars, there are invariably events that, although external to the immediate conflict, can alter the contest and change strategic calculations. These have put us in a different place from where we started 15 years ago. In the current conflict, some of these, like the invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, have been of America's own making. These actions led to a long, bloody insurgency that distracted attention and resources from efforts in Afghanistan and the campaign against al-Qa`ida while breathing new life into al-Qa`ida's propaganda line that aggressive infidels were bent upon conquering the Muslim world. The insurgency also created fertile ground for jihadist elements in Iraq who were never entirely suppressed and who later reemerged as the Islamic State.

Some point also to the consequences of the United States' complete withdrawal from Iraq. They say that the absence of a U.S.

military presence deprived the United States of the muscle to prevent the Iraqi government from creating a corrupt sectarian regime that alienated the Sunnis and replaced military commanders with less-competent loyalists. These critics assert that this rendered the Iraqi army a hollow force, which collapsed during the Islamic State offensive in 2014.

Al-Qa`ida's supporters saw the 2008 global financial crisis as evidence that its efforts were about to bring down America, just as jihadist myth portrays the earlier campaign against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan as the cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The second superpower did not fall, but the crisis underscored fiscal constraints, renewed domestic debates about military expenditures, and imposed new priorities on Western governments.

The most dramatic development was the Arab Spring. Al-Qa`ida's claim of responsibility for the wave of political protests that spread across the Arab world was easily dismissed, but the resulting turmoil distracted authorities and gave hard-pressed jihadist groups some breathing space in places like Egypt's Sinai. The protests also led to civil wars that completely changed the landscape of counterterrorist efforts.

In Libya, the political ferment quickly escalated, prompting foreign military intervention and the end of the Qaddafi regime. The result was a chaotic situation that jihadist elements quickly exploited. Faced with brutal government repression, the protests in Syria also turned violent, and by the end of 2011, Syria was at war with itself as the Islamic State, originally an offshoot of al-Qa`ida, declared its independence and launched a major military offensive across Syria and Iraq.

Events became even more complicated in September 2015 when Russia intervened militarily in Syria to assist the faltering Assad regime. Paralleling these developments, China began a significant buildup of its military presence in the South China Sea. Washington had already signaled its determination to "pivot" its attention away from Afghanistan and the Middle East to the Western Pacific. The renewed Russian threat to NATO and China's threat to U.S. allies in the Western Pacific—historically core interests—complicated strategic calculations. The pursuit of al-Qa`ida and continued U.S. involvement in Afghanistan and the Middle East now has to be considered within this broader strategic context.

A Preliminary Balance Sheet

A thorough appreciation of the current situation requires assessing progress in different fields of action and different geographic theaters. Critics of the administration's counterterrorist efforts will quarrel with this disaggregation, arguing that it compartmentalizes and therefore obscures the overall failure of U.S. counterterrorism efforts. In their view, the situation must be either better or worse: The continuing chaos in Syria, Iraq, and Libya; the proliferation of jihadist fronts; recruitment of foreign fighters; the growing volume of terrorism worldwide; and recent spikes in terrorist attacks in Europe and the United States indicate that it is worse.

But a closer examination of each of these aspects suggests a more complicated balance sheet. In some areas, counterterrorism efforts have been successful; in other areas, less so. And for every plus or minus entry, there is a "however." Moreover, as shown in the preceding discussion, the situation has been and continues to be dynamic.

On the plus side, *our worst fears have not been realized*. There have been no more 9/11s, none of the worst cases that post-9/11 extrapolations suggested. The 9/11 attacks now appear to be a statisti-

cal outlier, not a forerunner of further escalation. Terrorists have not used weapons of mass destruction, as many expected they would do. (At least they have not used them *yet*, many would add.) While the Islamic State appears to have recruited some chemical weapons specialists,³ the terrorist arsenal remains primitive, although lethal within bounds.

Contrary to the inflated rhetoric of some in government, *the operational capabilities of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State remain limited*. Both enterprises are beneficiaries of fortune (they would argue, of "God's will"). They are successful opportunists. The Islamic State's military success in Syria and Iraq reflects the collapse of the government's forces, not military prowess. With its legions of foreign fighters and deep financial pockets, the Islamic State theoretically could launch a global terrorist offensive, but the surge would probably be brief. This is not, as some have suggested, World War III.

Neither al-Qa`ida nor the Islamic State has become a mass movement, although both organizations attract sympathy in Muslim countries. The vast majority of Muslims polled over the years express negative views of jihadist organizations, but a significant minority expresses favorable views of al-Qa`ida and, more recently, of the Islamic State. While Usama bin Ladin's reputation declined in some Arab countries, 2013 polling found 13 percent of Muslims polled in Arab, African, and Asian countries still held favorable attitudes of al-Qa`ida.⁴ The declaration of a caliphate by the Islamic State in 2014 created excitement among extremists worldwide and injected new life into some moribund groups. According to polling in 2015, from zero to 14 percent of the people in the countries polled had a favorable view of the Islamic State, with Lebanon (a Shi'a-majority country) at zero and Nigeria at 14 percent.⁵ Although the percentage of favorable ratings for the terrorists is



The National September 11 Memorial and One World Trade Center in New York City (Cem Ozdel/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)

“These organizations have proven resilient and adaptive. They have morphed to meet new circumstances and exploit new opportunities, and they will continue to do so. The threat remains.”

generally low, it still represents large numbers of people—a deep reservoir of support.

The constellation of jihadist groups is not as meaningful as it appears to be. Competing for endorsements, al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State have attracted declarations of loyalty from local groups across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia and have established a host of affiliates, provinces, and jihadist footholds. This is growth by acquisition and branding. A lot of it is public relations. Many of these groups are the products of long-standing local grievances and conflicts that would continue if there were no al-Qa`ida or Islamic State. Some are organizational assertions that represent only a handful of militants. The militants share a banner but are, for the most part, focused on local quarrels rather than a global jihad. There is no central command. There are no joint operations. The groups operate autonomously. Their connections in many cases are tenuous, although, with time, they could evolve into something more connected. The split between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State has divided the groups. A number of them are beset by further internal divisions.

Like all terrorists, jihadis can kill, destroy, disrupt, alarm, and oblige governments to divert vast resources to secure against their attacks, but *terrorists cannot translate their attacks into permanent political gain.* Yet this is not the way they measure things. They tend to see their mission as continuing operations to demonstrate their commitment and awaken others.

The Islamic State is losing territory and can be defeated. With coalition air support and other external assistance, government forces in Iraq and U.S.-backed Kurdish and Arab fighters in Syria have been able to retake territory held by the Islamic State. Progress is slow, though faster than many analysts initially anticipated. This is not just a military challenge; it is also an effort to put something in place to govern recovered towns and cities.

Al-Qa`ida Central's command has been reduced to exhorting others to fight. The Islamic State has made very effective use of social media to reach a broader audience. Its advertisement of atrocity as evidence of its authenticity appears to have been a magnet for marginal and psychologically disturbed individuals. Jihadist ideology has become a conveyor of individual discontents.

Continuing calls on local terrorist supporters in the West to take action have thus far produced only a meager response. Measured against other recent terrorist campaigns, the level of violence has been low. During the eight years of the Algerian War, more than

5,000 people were killed in France.^d More than 3,600 died during the IRA's terrorist campaign.^e More than a thousand were killed during the Basque separatists' struggle in Spain.^e With larger volumes of homegrown terrorists and returning foreign fighters, Europe faces a greater threat than does the United States. An Islamic State network that combined returning fighters with a domestic radical underground carried out a two-year terrorist campaign that included the deadly attacks in Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016. But most of the attacks in Europe have been one-offs. However, these can be lethal, as seen in the July 14 attack in Nice. These terrorist attacks have also provoked a backlash, which rightwing extremists have exploited, raising the specter of civil strife.

In the United States, the number of homegrown terrorists remains a fraction of the numbers seen in Europe. All of the recent Islamic State-inspired attacks and plots uncovered in the United States have been the products of a single individual or a tiny conspiracy with no direct connections to any organization. Nonetheless, these attacks create alarm.

On the minus side, *the targets of the American campaign have survived U.S. counterterrorism efforts.* Al-Qa`ida has survived intense U.S.-led campaigns for 15 years, and now the Islamic State has survived them for two years. Al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State have been cornered, not crushed. No victory is final. These organizations have proven resilient and adaptive. They have morphed to meet new circumstances and exploit new opportunities, and they will continue to do so. The threat remains.

Their determination is undiminished. We cannot yet claim to have dented the determination of the jihadis to continue their armed struggle. They view strategy as process-oriented rather than progress-oriented, meaning that they derive benefit from commitment, regardless of immediate outcomes, which remain in God's hands. They believe that they are on the side of God and we are not, and therefore, in the long run, they believe they will prevail.

The jihadis have a powerful ideology that arouses extreme emotion and devotion. We cannot deny the appeal of the jihadist ideology, especially to persons predisposed by other collective grievances or personal problems. But on the plus side, the low numbers suggest that the ideology has gained little traction in America's Muslim communities. Personal crisis is the dominant attribute of America's jihadis.

The Taliban has been driven from power, but it remains a formidable foe and will not be tamed. The continued deployment of U.S. forces will be necessary to prevent the Taliban from regaining control of much of Afghanistan and preventing al-Qa`ida from a comeback by riding their coattails.

The fighting in Syria and Iraq will go on for the foreseeable future. Foreign powers have much at stake, but they have conflicting agendas and cannot impose peace from the outside. For local beligerents, the contests have become existential.

d This includes casualties from violence between Algerian militants inside France as well as terrorist attacks on French targets. See "Algeria, FLN, Country Studies" in Helen Chapan Metz ed. *Algeria: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1994).

e According to the Global Terrorism Database, 1,047 known fatalities resulted from the Basque separatist struggle in Spain between December 1970 and September 2014. See Global Terrorism Database, START, University of Maryland.

Faced with loss of its territory, the Islamic State will not quit. A long insurgency is likely to follow. The leaders of the Islamic State fought clandestinely for years in Iraq and could go underground again to continue the struggle. They could relocate to Libya or another jihadist stronghold, creating a mobile Islamic State. Or they could try to carry out some sort of dramatic attack that alters perceptions or changes the dynamics of the conflict. This could take the form of a Tet-style offensive in Baghdad or Damascus, a terrorist campaign that shakes the Saudi kingdom, or a dramatic act of terrorism abroad that provokes foreign intervention.

Syria and Iraq will remain fragile states, arenas of international competition, and sources of regional instability and continued violence. Current partitions are likely to persist. National institutions have eroded. Power on the ground has shifted to militias under local or foreign control and to the rebel formations. Neither government can restore authority throughout its national territory without significant foreign assistance, and they may not be able to do so even with such assistance, although Iraq may come closer. The Shi'a and Kurdish portions of Iraq and the Alawite-dominated bastion in western Syria may be economically viable, but the poorer and less-populated Sunni areas of both countries currently dominated by the rebels and the Islamic State could become persistent badlands.

The world will be dealing with the effluents of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq for years to come. The tens of thousands of foreign fighters who have joined the Islamic State and other jihadist groups have no future under Iraqi or Syrian government authority and cannot survive in an underground campaign. They will likely migrate to other jihadist formations, try to establish new jihadist fronts, or return home—some traumatized, some disillusioned, but some determined to continue their armed struggle. The destruction of the Islamic State could bring about a spike in terrorist activity by its veterans worldwide.

Refugees will pose a long-term challenge to society and security. Syria's brutal counterinsurgency strategy has generated huge refu-

gee flows. The refugees will not be able to return for the foreseeable future but are permanently displaced. Nor, given their volume, can they be easily absorbed by neighboring countries with small populations and delicate sectarian balances. Migrants and at least some foreign fighters have exploited the refugee flow to Europe. Most of the refugees will build new homes, but the refugee flow includes a large proportion of single young men, always a problematic demographic and especially so coming from violent environments and having little education. They will not easily find work and assimilate. Some will drift into crime, while others may be targets of radicalization.

The United States faces a multi-tiered threat. While the threat of large-scale attacks by terrorist teams infiltrating the country seems to have diminished, authorities still confront the problem of returning foreign fighters, although the numbers are far less than those in Europe, and returning American jihadis will not have a local underground to provide them with hideouts and assistance. The primary threat will come from the ability of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State to inspire attacks by self-radicalized individuals, as well as emotionally disturbed persons seeking attention by associating themselves with a terrorist cause.

The United States is better organized and equipped to combat terrorism, but its citizens remain fearful. The United States' frightened, angry, and divided society remains the country's biggest vulnerability. Progress in degrading al-Qa`ida's capabilities or dismantling the Islamic State is almost completely divorced from popular perceptions. Rather than appeal to traditional American values of courage, self-reliance, and sense of community, our current political system incentivizes the creation of fear.

So, to update my 2001 response to the Senate committee, after 15 years a lot has changed, there has been progress, and Americans are safer. But, no, we are not through yet. **CTC**

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The Dawn of Mass Jihad: Success in Syria Fuels al-Qa`ida's Evolution

By Charles Lister

Jabhat al-Nusra's decision to decouple itself from its external affiliations and to rebrand itself as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) is merely the latest move in the organization's 'long game' in Syria. Though its Syrian audience has praised the move thus far, the group has also lost several senior leaders who were unhappy at the disengagement from al-Qa`ida. Al-Qa`ida is itself increasingly evolving into an idea adopted and empowered by largely autonomous affiliates whose individual strategies have become explicitly local. Consequently, JFS represents a formidable movement in Syria, whose localist focus should be seen as a harbinger of a new era of more broadly supported, more sustainable and, thus, more dangerous jihadist militancy.

After a series of coordinated leaks and media releases, Jabhat al-Nusra announced on July 28, 2016,¹ that it had dissolved all "external" ties and "in serving the people of al-Sham" had renamed itself Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, or the Front for the Conquest of the Levant. The group's leader, Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa (Abu Mohammed al-Julani), revealed his face for the first time as part of this consequential rebranding exercise that was aimed at distinguishing his movement's activities in Syria from those of the transnational al-Qa`ida organization. Situated at either side of al-Julani during his video statement, however, were his chief aide and sharia official Abdulrahim Attoun (Abu Abdulrahman al-Shami) and jihadist veteran figure and former confidante of al-Qa`ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, Ahmed Salameh Mabrouk (Abu Faraj al-Masri).

Earlier in the day, Jabhat al-Nusra's media wing, Al-Manara al-Baydha (the White Minaret), had issued an audio statement from al-Zawahiri's new deputy, Ahmed Hassan (Abu al-Khayr al-Masri), who is likely now based in Syria.² In it, Abu al-Khayr made clear that as an organization, al-Qa`ida "blessed" any initiative aimed at separating Jabhat al-Nusra from the global movement for the sake of furthering the jihad in Syria. An older recording of al-Zawahiri was added to the statement, in which he asserted that "the bonds of

Islamic brotherhood are stronger than any obsolete links between organizations ... these organizational links must be sacrificed without hesitation if they threaten your unity."³

The intended message was therefore very clear. Jabhat al-Nusra was presenting itself specifically to a Syrian opposition audience as breaking away from any internationalist objectives in favor of dedicating itself exclusively to the local Syrian cause. Although this emphasis on localism had been a consistent and significant facet of Jabhat al-Nusra's modus operandi in Syria since mid-2012, many Syrians across the opposition spectrum had long maintained quiet concerns over the possibility that the group's ties to the transnational al-Qa`ida movement would one day see its objectives in Syria diverge from those of the revolution. By renaming itself and adopting a new brand, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham was primarily seeking to assuage these Syrian concerns in order to permanently seal its pivotally preeminent military role within broader opposition operations. Consequently, as this author assessed in these pages one year ago, Jabhat al-Nusra represents a wolf in sheep's clothing and is as much of an immediate threat to Syria's opposition as a long-term threat to international security.⁴

This uncoupling was by no means an easily made decision. A number of Jabhat al-Nusra's senior leadership figures had been considering the value of formally breaking ties with al-Qa`ida since 2013, but had consistently come up against strong resistance, particularly from Jordanian and Egyptian members of the group's Majlis al-Shura. After the rise of the so-called Islamic State in mid-2014 encouraged an internal assessment out of which Jabhat al-Nusra deemed it necessary to begin revealing more of its real hardline Islamist nature, some of the 'doves'—such as founding members Saleh al-Hamawi and Maysar Ali Musa Abdullah al-Juburi (Abu Mariya al-Qahtani)—became increasingly outspoken.⁵ For this, al-Hamawi was formally expelled from Jabhat al-Nusra in mid-2015.⁶

What changed this time around? As Syria's political process treaded water in early 2016 and as hostilities steadily escalated following a short-lived cessation of hostilities, Jabhat al-Nusra found its relationship of military interdependence with the mainstream opposition to be stronger than ever. At a time of great pressure, Jabhat al-Nusra's effectiveness on the battlefield was arguably being perceived as more important than ever by opposition groups and their civilian support base in northern Syria. Consequently, the group accepted into its ranks at least 3,000 Syrians from Aleppo and Idlib alone between February and June 2016.⁷

Al-Julani thus sought to exploit this advantage by proposing a grand merger with opposition groups across northern Syria, but he was quickly rebuffed due to his group's links to al-Qa`ida.⁸ In the weeks and months that followed, a substantial but highly secretive initiative was launched in which Islamist figures—both Syrian and foreign, and some previously linked to al-Qa`ida and others entirely independent—began lobbying Jabhat al-Nusra leaders and military commanders to consider more seriously separating themselves

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Screen capture from an October 27, 2015, video entitled “Al-Sham, the Graveyard of the Invaders” (“Al-Manara al-Bayda’: Aleppo’s Reporter,” Jabhat al-Nusra)

from al-Qa`ida. Many of these leaders crossed frequently between Turkey and northern Syria, conducting intensive shuttle diplomacy and consultation while using the safety of Turkish territory during pauses in the talks.⁹

One of these individuals, Egyptian national Rifai Taha, was killed in a U.S. drone strike in April,¹⁰ although one Islamist source told this author that the target of the strike was likely the earlier mentioned former al-Zawahiri confidante, Ahmed Salameh Mabrouk:

*Abu Faraj and Rifai Taha had attended a meeting together. After the meeting, at the last minute and I do not know why, Rifai took the car intended for Abu Faraj and departed. I saw this myself. This was Abu Faraj’s car that he regularly used to move between safe houses. It was that car that was targeted by the drone.*¹¹

As conflict steadily reassumed priority, rumor began to abound in June that the United States and Russia were actively considering enhanced cooperation on Syria, including in coordinating military action against Jabhat al-Nusra. It was within this context that the lobbying initiative gained real traction. By mid-July, approximately one-third of Jabhat al-Nusra’s entire force—including al-Qahtani and the Emir of Aleppo, Abdullah al-Sanadi—had tacitly agreed to splinter off and establish a new independent faction, *Al-Harakat al-Islamiya al-Souriya*, or the Syrian Islamic Movement.¹² Al-Hamawi confirmed the development to this author at the time, adding that “soon, there will be an ultimatum made to al-Nusra: either disengage [from al-Qa`ida] and merge with major Islamic factions, or face isolation socially, politically, and militarily.”¹³

Within days, al-Julani had called Jabhat al-Nusra’s Majlis al-Shura together to discuss the issue once again. Having already acquired al-Zawahiri’s permission and the consent of his deputy, Abu al-Khayr, the decision to announce a separation from al-Qa`ida was merely an issue for internal deliberation. According to one independent figure involved in the previous lobbying initiative and present around Jabhat al-Nusra’s debates, “it was not easy ... several leaders were strongly against the proposal and some even stormed

out of the meetings.”¹⁴

Two of those who left were Jordanians: Jabhat al-Nusra’s de facto deputy leader Dr. Sami al-Oraydi and the group’s Emir of Latakia, Iyad Tubasi (Abu Julaybib).¹⁵ According to four informed sources, both leadership figures refused to sign onto the formation of JFS when the final decision was made on July 26, although al-Oraydi avoided formally leaving the group altogether. That al-Qahtani was re-promoted back into JFS’ Shura Council, however, underlined the shift that had taken place. Along with at least seven others, including former military chief Abu Hammam al-Suri (Farouq al-Shami), senior al-Qa`ida figure Sayf al-Adel was also said to have held out, likely choosing to operate as a roving jihadist figure with his al-Qa`ida credentials intact.¹⁶ Al-Oraydi ceded his position as de facto deputy leader but had chosen not to formally leave JFS, at least not yet. By late August, many of these individuals were actively considering the establishment of a separate and likely covertly operating jihadist movement dedicated to pursuing more traditional, transnational objectives from within Syrian territory.¹⁷

In the wake of JFS’s emergence, the newly rebranded group played a critically important role in early August in breaking the siege of opposition-held eastern Aleppo. Images of armed groups subsequently driving into Aleppo with pickup trucks full of fresh food—the first such supplies in weeks—provided JFS with an invaluable ‘debut’ as part of what had been an especially broad-spectrum opposition operation. In keeping with this theme of enhancing unity (through which JFS can more effectively gain and consolidate influence) and by exploiting emotions peaked by the successful Aleppo offensive, JFS-linked figures began calling for formal mergers.

By mid-August, sizeable portions of Ahrar al-Sham were in direct talks regarding a potential merger, the initial aim of which would be a formal amalgamation of Jaish al-Fateh factions (JFS, Ahrar al-Sham, Faylaq al-Sham, Ajnad al-Sham, Liwa al-Haq, and Jaish al-Sunnah). Al-Qa`ida-linked jihadist groups Jund al-Aqsa and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) were also involved. While

merger advocates emphasized the importance of unity to further military effectiveness, opposition factions remained hesitant to endanger their relationships of support with regional states like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar. Intriguingly, CIA-vetted Free Syrian Army (FSA) factions were simultaneously in the midst of negotiating possible mergers themselves, in anticipation of Islamist unity and likely further irrelevance on the ground.¹⁸

While some extent of enhanced unity appeared inevitable, the precise outcome of all of these talks remained unclear at the time of publishing, though the trend toward military unity seemed inevitable.

Al-Qa`ida Central in Syria

Since at least early 2013, influential al-Qa`ida veterans began traveling to Syria under what appeared to be orders from central leadership.¹⁹ This was a reflection both of a perceived need to add to Jabhat al-Nusra's growing stature and jihadist credibility in Syria as well as to preempt an effort by the Islamic State to subsume the group—something Jabhat al-Nusra had been aware of since late 2012²⁰ and that took place in April 2013 when al-Qa`ida in Iraq leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced Jabhat al-Nusra was part of its network. Throughout the remainder of 2013, some of these al-Qa`ida Central (AQC) arrivals (notably, Saudi national Abd al-Muhsin Abdullah Ibrahim al-Sharikh, aka Sanafi al-Nasr) were initially instrumental in operationalizing links between Jabhat al-Nusra and the Abdullah Azzam Brigades,²¹ thereby securing a relationship that resulted in a series of deadly attacks in Lebanon that year.

As the Islamic State achieved global infamy in 2014, al-Qa`ida continued to deploy AQC figures to Syria in what was fast becoming a clear attempt to build the “safe base” that al-Zawahiri had advocated for in his September 2013 “General Guidelines for Jihad.”²² In tandem with these arrivals, the dynamics within Jabhat al-Nusra's Majlis al-Shura had also begun to shift with Egyptian and Jordanian figures asserting increasing levels of influence. The often more pragmatic al-Qahtani was demoted; Saleh al-Hamawi sidelined; and hardliners like al-Oraydi, Abu Hammam al-Suri, and Abu Julaybib were promoted.²³

As Jabhat al-Nusra's internal makeup and ideological perspective evolved, the U.S. government began claiming in the second half of 2014 that much of the newly arrived AQC-linked contingent in Syria had formed the “Khorasan Group” as an external operations wing operating out of the north of the country. This alleged plotting of ‘external’ attacks was used to justify the initiation of an air campaign against al-Qa`ida targets in Syria from September 2014, which Syrians subsequently perceived as attacks upon their military ally Jabhat al-Nusra and thus as counter-revolutionary.

Despite the group's discernible shift toward increasingly hard-line salafist-jihadist positions, the fallout over the airstrikes served as the first truly overt demonstration of Jabhat al-Nusra's greater popularity in rebel-controlled areas of Syria than the West. The group's strategic emphasis on localism, gradualism, and controlled pragmatism—the “long-game” approach—paired with its military preeminence on the battlefield provided insurance that any external assault on Jabhat al-Nusra would only distance ordinary Syrians further from the ‘international community.’

While the benefits of this long-game approach had thus been demonstrated in late 2014, al-Qa`ida's central leadership was nevertheless sensitive to attracting unnecessary international attention

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to Jabhat al-Nusra's presence in Syria. Consequently, as this author revealed later that year, al-Zawahiri sent a secret letter to al-Julani in early 2015, ordering the group to cease any external attack-plotting and institute a number of steps aimed at further embedding within broader revolutionary dynamics.²⁴ The formation of the Jaish al-Fateh coalition of Islamist armed groups in March 2015²⁵ and its steady conquest of Idlib governorate was then the clearest evidence of Jabhat al-Nusra's increasingly public emphasis on military unity, which would come to define the group's overarching message well into 2016.

By late 2015, the influx of influential al-Qa`ida jihadists reached its apex with the reported arrival of Egyptian powerhouses Saif al-Adel, Ahmed Salameh Mabrouk (Abu al-Faraj), and al-Zawahiri's new number two, Ahmed Hassan (Abu al-Khayr).²⁵ The resulting presence of so many individually influential al-Qa`ida veterans on Syrian soil, including the deputy leader of al-Qa`ida, represented nothing short of a major revitalization of the jihadist movement within the context of a particularly brutal and intractable conflict. Syria was undoubtedly at the heart of al-Qa`ida's evolving international strategy.

From ‘Elite’ to ‘Mass’ Jihad

Jabhat al-Nusra's jihad in Syria has thus far experienced two distinct phases, the second of which only began in mid-2016. The first phase, as the group has frequently explained,²⁶ was an ‘elite’-driven project in which the group and its highly experienced leadership sought to grow roots in Syria, to embed within revolutionary dynamics, and to influence the trajectory of the conflict and the opposition itself toward accepting more and more of an Islamist framework. The elite-driven nature of this first phase was deemed necessary because pre-revolution Syrian Sunni society had been insufficiently exposed to the purism of their faith and was therefore not only ill-equipped to initiate a viable Islamist movement but also unlikely to support one.

It was for exactly this reason that Jabhat al-Nusra's first years of activity in Syria were so explicitly focused on military matters—in contributing toward a shared *Syrian* resistance to the Assad regime. Throughout this period, Jabhat al-Nusra formed and shaped battlefield alliances and sought to demonstrate its military value to Syria's mainstream opposition. The group aimed to build up a rela-

a At its first phase of operations, Jaish al-Fateh contained Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, Jund al-Aqsa, Liwa al-Haq, Jaysh al-Sunna, Ajnad al-Sham, and Faylaq al-Sham.

tionship of interdependence through which it could slowly socialize communities into accepting the presence of a highly conservative, jihadist movement in its midst.

A core component of this strategy from the start was Jabhat al-Nusra's self-presentation to Syrians (its sole audience) as literally a 'front' (*al-jabha*) for 'support' (*al-nusra*). Although it did little to hide its jihadist roots, Jabhat al-Nusra explicitly avoided styling itself as an outsider force, but instead sought to be perceived as a vanguard dedicated to supporting a popular uprising and protecting its Sunni adherents from suppression by a brutal and heretical dictatorship.

This period of 'elite'-driven jihad was itself shaped by two core ideological tenets,²⁷ which together formed a strategy of continuous and socially sustainable gains. The first of these tenets was *qital al-tamkin*, or a battle for the consolidation of one's presence within territory. In contrast to the more individualistic *qital al-nikaya* (or fighting to hurt the enemy and its interests), *qital al-tamkin* places an overarching emphasis upon a jihad that seeks to methodically acquire and consolidate influence over territory, through which one then builds support within the Muslim masses over an extended period of time. The second tenet was *riayat al-masalaha wa mani' al-mafasid*, or minding one's interests and avoiding spoilers, which explicitly demonstrates the group's long-game approach of advancing the cause of jihad initially within the national confines of Syria and slowly enough to grow sustainably and to avoid attracting powerful adversaries.²⁸

This emphasis upon localism and the sustainable acquisition of territory is a core facet of al-Zawahiri's personally developed model of jihad. Jabhat al-Nusra and its leadership in Syria clearly saw the value in pursuing this approach, as it had been described by al-Zawahiri himself in his 252-page book from 2001, *The Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*:

*The jihad movement must adopt its plan on the basis of controlling a piece of land in the heart of the Islamic world on which it could establish and protect the state of Islam and launch its battle to restore the rational Caliphate ... The jihad movement must [also] become closer to the masses ... we must win the people's confidence, respect, and affection.*²⁹

Throughout this first phase, Jabhat al-Nusra also sought to build a protective infrastructure of tacitly loyal jihadist groups that would insulate it from threats or competition from the Islamic State and that would augment its influence on the battlefield. The arrival of senior al-Qa`ida figures from across the Islamic world played an especially critical role in solidifying relationships of tacit allegiance between these small jihadist units, like the TIP and Harakat Sham al-Islam and Jabhat al-Nusra itself.

At certain points, Jabhat al-Nusra directly managed the formation of such loyalist factions, as in early 2013 when al-Julani was aware that the Islamic State had deployed senior figures into northern Syria in preparation for a hostile takeover of his forces. In reaction, he dispatched a close confidante, Mohammed Yusuf al-Athamna (Abdulaziz al-Qatari), to break away and form a new group, Saraya al-Aqsa, as an umbrella for loyalist *muhajireen* (foreign fighters). The formation of this group, now known as Jund al-Aqsa, almost certainly saved Jabhat al-Nusra from internal collapse during the Islamic State's emergence in April 2013, during which much of its remaining *muhajireen* were poached by the then Iraq-based movement.³⁰

Throughout 2015, Jabhat al-Nusra began to test the viability

"The controversial al-Qa`ida affiliation remained Jabhat al-Nusra's key barrier to consolidating its expanded influence into a durable mass movement."

of transitioning into its second phase, 'mass' jihad. The success of Jaish al-Fateh in Idlib had proven that when it came to military activities, Jabhat al-Nusra could shape dynamics and the trajectory of fighting to suit its interests. After all, Idlib had been the group's key zone of investment for almost a year prior to launching the operation that led to Idlib city's capture in March 2015. Russia's military intervention in September 2015 and the reported arrival of senior al-Qa`ida figures shortly thereafter appeared to catalyze the shift toward realizing the 'mass' movement.

Consequently, al-Julani's proposal of a grand merger in January 2016; Jabhat al-Nusra's overt spoiling of the cessation of hostilities (COH) in early April;³¹ and the group's rebranding as JFS in July all represent a move toward this second phase of mass-driven jihad in Syria. This appears to be because Jabhat al-Nusra assessed that its first phase of elite-driven jihad had reached its greatest potential. And it was also because the prospect of military action against its assets due to intensifying international concern surrounding the group's expanding influence in Syria necessitated another step toward embedding itself within broader armed opposition dynamics.

Within this context, the controversial al-Qa`ida affiliation remained Jabhat al-Nusra's key barrier to consolidating its expanded influence into a durable mass movement. As JFS' newly appointed Director of Foreign Media Relations Mustafa Mahamed Farag (Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir)—an Australian-Egyptian leadership figure—explained, "organizational affiliations are usually temporary" and Jabhat al-Nusra's time to advance beyond its *external* link to al-Qa`ida has now passed.³²

"Once the goal of that affiliation can no longer be met, or a larger, more important goal cannot be achieved as a result of that affiliation, then it is time to move on. At the time, Jabhat al-Nusra had a relationship with Al-Qaeda. It served a purpose by funneling a global, Islamic support of jihad into the local Syrian arena. It was able to support an already very popular jihad with the brand that many mujahideen identified with. By doing this, Jabhat al-Nusra was able to focus the efforts of the youth and channel their energies into an Islamic and justified, moral cause. The need for that no longer exists, however. The break was also required in order to fulfill our communal obligations to the Muslims in Syria. The practical implications of this split include the full independence we now enjoy, which gives us more freedom in decision-making. It also removed potential obstacles that stand in the way of a long hoped-for unification of ranks."

The fact that the newly named JFS was able to follow up its rebranding by leading an expansive offensive that broke the intensely emotive siege of eastern Aleppo city in early August provided the group with a public relations win of immeasurable value. Behind the scenes, meanwhile, JFS then paired its military advantage on the ground with the intensified lobbying effort pushing for mergers with opposition groups. Although most groups involved still har-

bored serious concerns, the likelihood of some consequential mergers appeared greater than ever before. Clearly a sub-set of Syrian rebels perceived JFS' emergence as a significant-enough 'concession' to revolutionary demands as to more seriously entertain the idea of combining forces.

Al-Qa`ida's Operating Model Evolves

Spurred on by Jabhat al-Nusra's steady growth in influence and confidence in Syria, al-Qa`ida as a transnational movement has itself evolved increasingly toward pursuing a model of decentralized jihad in which largely autonomous affiliates seek to operate within exclusively local theaters of populist battle. In a sense, al-Qa`ida has become more of an idea or model for jihad than it has continued to represent a discernible organization. By following al-Qa`ida's strategic guidance and by continually adapting to evolving local Syrian circumstances, Jabhat al-Nusra has demonstrated the intrinsic advantages that result from pursuing a long-game approach that keeps the potentially toxic al-Qa`ida brand at arm's length.

Ultimately, the newly rebranded JFS will seek exactly the same strategic objectives that Jabhat al-Nusra did, namely the future establishment of an Islamic Emirate in Syria from which broader international objectives might one day be realized. Having deployed a substantial number of AQC figures into Syrian territory and placed them both within and outside of JFS' command structure, AQC and al-Zawahiri are in a position to present themselves as ceding *external* (or extra-Syrian) authority over the group.

In reality, however, JFS merely represents the latest stage in the jihadist movement's long-game strategy, which is now focused on broadening the appeal of its jihadist project; isolating Syria's opposition further from the international community and vice versa; and undermining the long-term credibility of more moderate opposition ideals. Throughout this new phase, JFS will, in all likelihood, hope to find itself in a position eventually to acquire a critical mass sufficient to support the establishment of an Islamic Emirate in northern Syria (likely in Idlib). Crucially, JFS will only seek to achieve this goal once a consultation process determines that doing so would not result in overwhelming local opposition. Jabhat al-Nusra already made one such outreach attempt in early 2016 and received strong resistance.³³

That al-Qa`ida has undertaken this evolution is an indication both of its own internal strategic learning and a recognition of the relative isolation of AQC from rapidly evolving and complex zones of jihad in Syria and Yemen. It is likely also a reflection of a perceived need to adapt to operating in a qualitatively different way than the Islamic State. Instability in the Middle East and North Africa looks set to last for many years, likely for one or two generations. As such, the continual development and refining of this long-game model appears to be the most sustainable jihadist project in existence and promises to make the al-Qa`ida idea a formidable threat to local, regional, and eventually international security for many years to come.

This approach does, however, bring with it one potential challenge, namely the reality that increasing localism and the resulting erosion of traditional al-Qa`ida transnationalism and ideological absolutism provides openings for opposition groups to steadily constrain remaining JFS extremist tendencies and isolate them from any future united force. Thus far, this appears to have been a principal reason for senior-level defections from JFS following its formation, given the danger of mergers with more mainstream



Abu Muhammad al-Julani flanked by Abdulrahim Attoun (right) and Ahmed Salameh Mabrouk (left) (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)

opposition groups. Certainly some Syrian advocates of unity with JFS see such a consequence as an important motivation, as one Aleppo-based leader explained:

*"Unity by itself has an important military value to us, in fighting the regime. However, we are also aware that some within [JFS] have ideas that contradict those of the [Syrian] revolution. When factions join [military] operations rooms, decisions are made by consensus. The same rule would apply if we merged with [JFS]. The most difficult voices inside the jihadi factions would become a minority and Syrian limitations would quickly be established. This is what some in al-Qa`ida are afraid of."*³⁴

Analysis following Jabhat al-Nusra's rebranding into JFS has justifiably contained a substantial dose of skepticism. Indeed, it remains highly unlikely that JFS now represents anything substantially different than before. However, it would be a mistake to interpret the group's identity change solely through a Western-centric counterterrorism lens and to dismiss it as wholly irrelevant. The rebranding was an exercise aimed almost exclusively at a local Syrian audience, as the group announced it was breaking all *external* ties relating to allegiance and strategic instruction. Crucially, this does not mean JFS has no ties to al-Qa`ida per se, but rather that it claims not to have any ties of allegiance or strategic instruction to or from al-Qa`ida *outside* Syria. It is precisely this foreign influence that Syrians have consistently pushed back against and as it is internal dynamics that they feel they can continue to control.

This internal-external distinction is critically important as al-Qa`ida had already established its own leadership authority *inside* Syria prior to the announcement, while the true tactical and strategic value of allegiance and instruction from AQC in Afghanistan-Pakistan had already proven itself of minimal importance. Recent comments made by Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir made the internal-external distinction patently clear:

*"[Jabhat al-Nusra] was an official branch of [Al-Qa`ida]. We reported to their central command. We worked within their framework. We adhered to their policies ... With the formation of JFS, now we're a completely independent entity. We don't report to anyone or receive directives from any external entity. If dissolving external organizational affiliations will remove the obstacles on the path of unity, then it must be done."*³⁵

As previously stated, three separate Islamist sources have confirmed to this author that at least 10 senior Jabhat al-Nusra

figures—including al-Julani’s deputy al-Oraydi—had refused to sign-up to the JFS formation, while at least 200 of its fighters have quietly defected to other jihadist groups, primarily Jund al-Aqsa.³⁶ While al-Oraydi maintained his quiet opposition to JFS, founding Jabhat al-Nusra member Iyad Tubasi (Abu Julaybib) publicly announced his break from JFS on August 23, rebuking the group’s “disengagement” from al-Qa`ida. Two other senior leaders, Abu Khadija al-Urduni and Abu Hammam al-Suri, were, according to two Syrian sources, set to leak reports of their defection as well, with the latter having already submitted a resignation letter to al-Julani earlier in August.³⁷

Such discord would suggest that something of substance had indeed changed organizationally. Certainly, the fear that mergers with less extreme opposition groups might dilute JFS’ ideological purity is emerging as a serious point of contention within JFS’ al-Qa`ida ‘old guard.’ That dynamic should be a matter of as much focus as the potential that JFS’ rebranding was a sophisticated ruse. After all, much of the lobbying effort by non-al-Qa`ida Syrians was undertaken precisely so as to give the Syrian mainstream more of an opportunity to constrain extremist elements within Jabhat al-Nusra. Some of those pursuing mergers maintain that same mindset.³⁸

Whether this claimed step toward complete localism—for the time being—is fully embraced by Syrians remains to be seen, though conversations this author has conducted with leadership figures from 32 key armed opposition groups spanning from U.S.-vetted FSA factions to Ahrar al-Sham indicated that *all* perceived the formation of JFS as a positive move and as a “concession” to revolutionary demands.³⁹ However, as Ahrar al-Sham’s Director of External Relations Labib al-Nahas has made clear, Syrians still expect to see more discernible evidence from JFS that “disassociating is not only organizational.”⁴⁰ In other words, JFS behavior also needs to change.

Outlook

In the immediate term, JFS will continue to place a dual emphasis on military activities (in order to underline the value of inter-group cooperation on the battlefield) and on rebel unity (in order to consolidate and embed its growing influence into the heart of Syria’s revolution). This issue of ‘unity’ will form a core basis of the group’s messaging, both in seeking continued battlefield success and in protecting the ‘revolution’ from external threat. At a certain point, after a series of demonstrated military successes and possibly also military mergers, JFS will also seek to expand its activities into the political arena by pushing its more geopolitically isolationist vision upon the broad spectrum of the opposition.

At its core, JFS will remain a locally focused organization whose transnational tendencies and ideological foundations will remain largely discrete so long as the anti-Assad revolution remains a more valuable mechanism for mobilization and for the continued long-term viability of the jihadist project. Should Abu Julaybib’s breaking away and Abu Hammam al-Suri’s ‘resignation’ from JFS be followed by further defections, the possibility that components of the Syrian opposition might then seek to dilute JFS’ remaining and most extreme jihadist tendencies by explicitly agreeing to merge with the group should not be discounted.

Notwithstanding JFS’ continued focus on the long-game and localism, some level of intensified international military action against the group also seems highly likely, given declarations made publicly by both the United States and Russia. That in and of itself will make it all the more likely that JFS will aim to draw more of the mainstream opposition further into its operational orbit to prevent external pressure from successfully decoupling opposition groups from working with it. Intensified efforts will doubtlessly also be invested by JFS to secure the formal subsuming of friendly jihadist groups already under the al-Qa`ida umbrella. Moreover, interna-



Photo from Jabhat Fateh al-Sham’s official Twitter and Telegram accounts purportedly depicting its battle against the Syrian Army on August 23, 2016, on the outskirts of al-Zara village on Homs’ northern suburbs (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)

tional attempts to further the political process through ‘regimes of calm,’ ceasefires, or even a new COH will almost certainly be actively spoiled by JFS in order to sustain the conflict upon which it relies.

Despite its localist focus, JFS should still be perceived as a substantial threat given its deep roots within conflict dynamics and the strong likelihood that it will therefore remain a highly sophisticated and capable armed actor into the long-term. However, policy-makers must urgently recognize that JFS represents an extremely different challenge than that posed by the Islamic State. Precisely because it has invested so heavily in embedding within populist revolutionary dynamics and has established such a durable relationship of interdependence with opposition factions, the strategy to counter it must necessarily take a more holistic form. Within this context, any possible external attack-plotting is far more likely to emanate from JFS defectors than from JFS itself.

Given the underlying strategy behind JFS’ formation and the clear need to remain locally focused in order to further grow and consolidate the group’s overarching influence, it remains unlikely that JFS itself would initiate external attack-plotting. However, JFS alone does not represent the entirety of al-Qa`ida’s de facto presence inside Syria. Notwithstanding the likelihood that Abu al-Khayr is in Syria, a concentric circle of al-Qa`ida-linked jihadist support groups surrounding JFS retains substantive links to al-Qa`ida’s transnational structures. For example, the former military leader of Jund al-Aqsa—French-Algerian national Said Arif—was killed in one of a series of U.S. drone strikes targeting Khorasan Group leaders in May 2015. He was later described as “a major recruiter of foreign fighters.”⁴¹

Outside of armed groups altogether, influential al-Qa`ida-linked figures like Rifai Taha⁴² had been known to travel in and out of Syria through Turkey. Therefore, should al-Qa`ida itself choose to initiate external attack-plotting, it seems unlikely that it would choose JFS as the structure out of which such plans would emanate. Doing so would contradict and endanger the methodical progress made by the group over the past five years. A splinter group like the one al-Adel and other al-Qa`ida figures are considering creating could be a possible vehicle for external plotting in the future.

Moreover, JFS’ intensifying focus on merging with opposition factions in Syria means that at least in the medium-term, any scope for reintroducing a transnational vision into the group’s *overt* strategic vision looks to be significantly constrained. Even Ahrar al-Sham is highly unlikely to ever entertain the prospect of members of an expanded Syria-based Islamist movement actively advocating for or acting upon plans to attack the West.

Intensified external intervention against JFS, meanwhile—as it is individually or as a movement enlarged by mergers—in Syria would undoubtedly serve to give JFS more credibility within broader opposition circles, but retaliation through foreign attacks, at least for the foreseeable future, would remain a step too far, even for some of the most conservative *Syrian* oppositionists. “Under no circumstances can we as the Syrian people ever accept that our territory be used for terrorism abroad, not by Daesh or any other party,” one Ahrar al-Sham official told this author in August 2016.⁴³

Out-Competing JFS

It is a highly unfortunate reality that many Syrians living in opposi-

tion areas of Syria perceive JFS as a more determined and effective protector of their lives and interests than the United States and its Western allies. This credibility issue is arguably *the* principal mechanism that has allowed JFS and Jabhat al-Nusra before it to acquire such substantial acceptance within communities that would otherwise have rejected jihadis aligned with al-Qa`ida from living and operating within their midst. In any strategy aimed at undermining JFS, due consideration should be given to prioritizing the protection of civilians as the group’s fate is inherently interconnected with the outcome of the Syrian conflict.

At its heart, JFS has thrived in Syria as a result of two inter-related realities: on the one hand, consistent conflict, instability, and the regime’s unchallenged mass killing of civilians, and on the other hand, an insufficiently supported and protected mainstream, moderate civil, political, and armed opposition. If reversed, these two realities could become JFS’ greatest vulnerabilities.⁴⁴

To tackle the first of these two realities, the United States and its international partners should consider urgently prioritizing the protection of civilians in Syria. While the establishment of formal safe or no-fly zones appears to be an increasingly unlikely scenario, the United States could credibly threaten limited punitive military measures for especially flagrant acts of targeted civilian killing by the Assad regime, the aim of which would be three-fold: to demonstrate to Syrian civilians that the United States was determined to protect their lives; to induce a period of relative calm across the country by curtailing Syrian government aggression; and thereby to impose pressure on the Assad regime to pursue a political solution. All three outcomes would diminish JFS’ advantages on the ground and from its broader narrative of the conflict. To best avoid detrimental reactions to punitive military measures, Russia would necessarily be pre-informed and given a time-limited period to leverage its influence over the Assad regime.

To tackle the second reality, the United States and its international allies must acknowledge the interrelation between a weak or insufficiently supported moderate opposition and a stronger JFS and its circle of jihadist allies. JFS only enjoys the acceptance and support of opposition societies because no better alternative exists. It can be argued that a confident, well-supported, and protected vetted opposition remains the best and only durable option available to securing a mainstream Sunni Arab role in determining Syria’s future and in providing a sociocultural alternative to JFS’ pseudo-revolutionary narrative. At least 69 such vetted factions currently exist across Syria, though they have never received enough support to produce credible moderate opposition dominance.⁴⁵

In short, due to the very nature of JFS’ long-game approach and its extensive roots and interdependent relationship with Syria’s ‘revolution,’ combating it must necessarily be about far more than mere kinetic counterterrorism actions. JFS will never be destroyed altogether, but rather its largest structures can be degraded and its most extreme elements isolated through the two policy facets described above. If the unique nature of JFS’ long-game strategy and presence in Syria is not fully acknowledged and should orthodox counterterrorism measures be brought against it by external powers in isolation from other measures, JFS will only reap the benefit. **CTC**

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Al-Qa`ida's Comeback in Afghanistan and its Implications

By Anne Stenersen

Fifteen years after the start of Operation Enduring Freedom, al-Qa`ida appears to be rebuilding its presence in Afghanistan. Al-Qa`ida's comeback in Afghanistan can be understood in light of three main factors: its enduring relationship with the Taliban, its drive to embed its struggle with local and regional insurgents and broaden its support, and its ability to adapt its strategies and methods to respond to current events. While al-Qa`ida is focused on establishing a presence in the Middle East, al-Qa`ida's Pakistani-led branch on the Indian Subcontinent appears more of a regional than global threat. However, this could easily change, and therefore containing the al-Qa`ida threat in Afghanistan is still a matter of urgent concern for the Western counterterrorism community.

In July 2015, U.S. forces discovered a large "al-Qa`ida camp" in the Kandahar province of Afghanistan. The most surprising feature of the camp was its sheer size. A joint attack on the site in October 2015 lasted several days and involved 63 airstrikes and a 200-strong ground assault team. More than 160 "suspected terrorists" were reportedly killed in the attack.¹ The number of dead fighters far surpassed official estimates of the number of al-Qa`ida fighters in Afghanistan, which for years was said to be between 50 and 100.^a

The discovery shook two assumptions about al-Qa`ida—first, that al-Qa`ida was "decimated" in Afghanistan and Pakistan as a result of U.S. counterterrorism efforts and second, that al-Qa`ida

operates only in southeastern and eastern provinces of the country.² The discovery has led to renewed debate about the size and nature of future U.S. military engagements in Afghanistan. There are fears that if the United States continues the planned drawdown of military troops, al-Qa`ida might return to use the country as sanctuary as it did before 2001.³

The argument about al-Qa`ida's purported comeback in Afghanistan has potentially serious policy implications. However, the driving causes behind this development have not yet been closely scrutinized. Existing views tend to interpret al-Qa`ida's comeback as a result of "increased linkages" between al-Qa`ida and the Taliban.⁴ While this is certainly true, al-Qa`ida's improving fortunes in Afghanistan are the result of multi-faceted developments, including the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) drawdown in 2014, Pakistani counterterrorism policies, and al-Qa`ida's own strategic priorities for the region.

To inform the ongoing policy debate, this article explores how al-Qa`ida has managed to maintain and restore a presence in Afghanistan while, at the same time, shifting many senior operatives to the Arab world. It argues that al-Qa`ida's comeback in Afghanistan is the result of three main factors: its enduring relationship with the Taliban; its ability to embed its struggle within local and regional insurgencies; and finally, its opportunistic nature, which allows al-Qa`ida to adapt its strategies and methods in response to current events. While al-Qa`ida on the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) seems to remain a regional threat for now, this could easily change in the mid- to long-term.

Geographic Overview

After the fall of the Taliban regime in December 2001, al-Qa`ida built a new safe haven in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan, in particular in the South and North Waziristan agencies. From here, al-Qa`ida started supporting the nascent Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan through its historical allies from the Afghan-Soviet war such as Jalaluddin Haqqani's group (later known as the "Haqqani network").⁵ Until about 2010, al-Qa`ida enjoyed relative safe haven in Waziristan and was capable of staging international terrorist attacks in addition to running training camps and supporting local insurgencies.⁶ Al-Qa`ida was gradually increasing its presence in Afghanistan, with activities concentrated in eastern and southeastern provinces. Internal documents claim that in 2010 al-Qa`ida had a presence in at least eight Afghan provinces, including a "battalion" in Kunar and Nuristan led by the Qatari al-Qa`ida member Farouq al-Qahtani.⁷

From around 2010, al-Qa`ida leaders in Waziristan were coming under increasing pressure from U.S. drone attacks. High-ranking leaders in Waziristan, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid and Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, were killed in 2010 and 2011, respectively. In this period al-Qa`ida contemplated moving part of its organization to eastern Afghanistan, in particular to the safe haven in Nuristan estab-

a The Long War Journal, an online American publication focusing on counterterrorism, has long claimed that official U.S. estimates of "50 to 100" al-Qaida fighters in Afghanistan have been too low. In April 2016, U.S. officials adjusted the number to 300, seemingly acknowledging that al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan was stronger than previously thought. Bill Roggio and Thomas Joscelyn, "US Military Admits Al Qaeda Is Stronger In Afghanistan Than Previously Estimated," Long War Journal, April 13, 2016; Nick Paton Walsh, "Al Qaeda 'very active' in Afghanistan: U.S. Commander," CNN, April 13, 2016.

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lished by al-Qahtani.⁸ It indicates that al-Qa`ida leaders believed eastern Afghanistan to be a viable safe haven, even several years before ISAF wound down operations in Afghanistan in December 2014.

Al-Qahtani apparently continues to enjoy sanctuary in eastern Afghanistan. In February 2016, he was designated a global terrorist by the U.S. Department of the Treasury and has been described as “one of the most important remaining [al-Qa`ida] figures in the region.”⁹ He is said to be involved in fundraising and international terrorist planning, in addition to being al-Qa`ida’s overall leader for eastern Afghanistan. If this information is correct, he may indeed be viewed as one of Ayman al-Zawahiri’s top deputies in the region.

In 2015, it appeared that the rise of the Islamic State in eastern Afghanistan had the potential to challenge al-Qa`ida groups like al-Qahtani’s.¹⁰ However, the Islamic State in 2016 no longer appears to be a threat as it has been severely weakened in its main stronghold in Nangarhar.¹¹ It is thus likely that al-Qa`ida will continue to uphold a presence in remote areas of eastern Afghanistan by exploiting the security gaps left by the ISAF drawdown.

The other entity that has marked its presence in Afghanistan over the past two years is AQIS. The “al-Qa`ida camp” discovered in Shorabak district in Kandahar in June 2015 was, in fact, an AQIS-affiliated camp.¹² It is unlikely that all of the 160 suspects killed in the assault on the camp in October were AQIS members, however. The camp was reportedly shared by militants from multiple groups and provided a wide range of courses including “basic training.”¹³ Thus, it seems likely that those killed included members from other groups and perhaps also individuals who had not yet joined a group, as this typically happens only after completing a certain amount of basic training. Judging from how al-Qa`ida operated elsewhere in the region, it seems plausible that the camp was a joint venture where AQIS provided training and other types of support to local and regional militants.¹⁴

The presence of AQIS militants in Kandahar is a significant development. Al-Qa`ida militants have traditionally operated in eastern and southeastern Afghanistan, but the AQIS camp discovered in 2015 was right in the Taliban’s heartland. Shorabak is situated close to Quetta, Pakistan, and has traditionally functioned as a smuggling and transit corridor between the two countries. Taliban influence in Shorabak district has increased over time, in part due to destabilization resulting from government corruption and election fraud. Especially after the 2009 elections, the dominant Bareetz tribe was robbed of its votes and suppressed by the provincial government. Many of its members subsequently joined the Taliban.¹⁵ The neighboring district of Registan, which is inhabited by Baluch tribes and made up mostly of desert, has been under de facto under control by the Taliban since at least 2009. On October 2, 2014, the Taliban officially claimed to have captured the district via its Baluch affiliate, Junood al-Fida.¹⁶

After the ISAF drawdown in December 2014, the Taliban increased its influence in several districts in Helmand, Kandahar, and Uruzgan. Al-Qa`ida, for its part, appears to be riding the Taliban’s

coattails.^b To explain the enduring relationship between al-Qa`ida and Taliban and the apparent deepening of these ties in southern Afghanistan, it is important to look at changes within the Taliban leadership over the past few years.

Riding the Taliban’s Coattails

The relationship between al-Qa`ida and the Taliban started in 1996, when the Taliban allowed Usama bin Ladin and a group of his Arab followers to stay under the Taliban’s protection in Afghanistan. Ever since then, the two entities have been allies, although the relationship has had its ups and downs.¹⁷ After 2001, when part of the Taliban continued as an insurgent movement, the group allowed foreign fighters, including Arabs from al-Qa`ida, to fight in its ranks.¹⁸ The Taliban’s leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, never openly disavowed bin Ladin or al-Qa`ida nor blamed him for bringing about the Taliban regime’s demise in 2001. When bin Ladin was killed in 2011, the Taliban leadership issued a public eulogy, which is customary among militant Islamists. Bin Ladin’s successor, al-Zawahiri, subsequently renewed his oath of allegiance to Mullah Omar.

Mullah Omar died in 2013, but his death was not made public until two years later. Meanwhile, Mullah Omar’s deputy, Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, was running the Taliban’s affairs and even issued statements in Mullah Omar’s name. Al-Zawahiri also continued to praise Mullah Omar in his speeches after 2013, indicating that he either did not know that Mullah Omar had died or that he was part of the scheme to cover up his death.¹⁹

When Mullah Omar’s demise became public in 2015, it sparked a leadership crisis within the Taliban. Part of the organization, including Mullah Omar’s sons, refused to accept Mansour as the new leader. In the end, the various Taliban factions reached a compromise in which Sirajuddin Haqqani, son of Jalaluddin Haqqani and current leader of the “Haqqani Network,” was elevated to the position of deputy leader, a position he continues to hold under Mansour’s successor, Mullah Haibatullah. This, in turn, may have strengthened the al-Qa`ida-Taliban nexus, as the Haqqanis have traditionally been close allies of al-Qa`ida and accepting of Arab and other foreign fighters in their ranks.²⁰

The leadership changes within the Taliban may be part of the reason why al-Qa`ida managed to build a considerable presence in southern Kandahar—the heartland of the Taliban—in 2015. On the other hand, Sirajuddin Haqqani remains an “eastern” Pashtun who would normally hold little traditional influence among the southern Pashtun tribes to which the Kandahari Taliban belong.

Much still remains unknown, especially in open sources, about the inner dynamics of the Taliban leadership and their relationship to al-Qa`ida. However, it seems that al-Qa`ida’s presence in southern Afghanistan cannot be explained simply by its historical ties to

b Registan and Shorabak were subject to certain disruptive ISAF operations, but for the large part, ISAF left it to the Afghan Border Police and other local security forces to maintain control in the southern districts. ISAF concentrated its operations, such as the large Hamkari operation in 2010, on more urgent Taliban threats in districts closer to Kandahar city. Carl Forsberg, “Counterinsurgency in Kandahar: Evaluating the 2010 Hamkari campaign,” Institute for the Study of War, December 2010. For a discussion of how al-Qa`ida is riding the Taliban’s coattails, see Olivier Roy and Tore Hamming, “Al-Zawahiri’s Bay’a to Mullah Mansoor: A Bitter Pill but a Bountiful Harvest,” *CTC Sentinel* 9:5 (2016): pp. 16-21.

certain Taliban members. The identity of the “al-Qa`ida camp” in Kandahar must be taken into account. As mentioned, the camp was not affiliated with al-Qa`ida’s central leadership but with al-Qa`ida’s Pakistani-led branch, AQIS.

The AQIS Factor

AQIS was officially established by al-Zawahiri in September 2014.^c AQIS may be described as a “regional branch” of al-Qa`ida, similar to al-Qa`ida on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen and al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in North Africa. Given the geographic proximity of AQIS and al-Qa`ida Central, the difference between the two may not be as evident.^d However, there are important distinctions between the two organizations, which become clear when looking at developments leading to AQIS’ formation.

AQIS was established a few months after the Islamic State declared it had established a “caliphate” on the soil of Iraq and Syria. This led observers to believe that AQIS was established to boost al-Qa`ida’s image as part of its ongoing propaganda war with the Islamic State.²¹ The announcement of the Islamic State caliphate may indeed have influenced the timing and manner of AQIS’ announcement. At the same time, it should be pointed out that AQIS is the outcome of a long series of events, starting in 2007 when there was a gradual shift in al-Qa`ida’s strategies for the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. The shift was a response to significant events within Pakistan, above all the highly controversial siege of the Red Mosque in Islamabad in July 2007. The siege and subsequent assault on the Red Mosque by Pakistani special forces led to an escalation in the conflict between the Pakistani state and Islamist militias in the tribal areas of Pakistan.²² The militias formed an umbrella organization, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), to conduct what they termed “defensive jihad” against the Pakistani state.²³ In practice, it meant defending tribal territories against Pakistani Army incursions, combined with an escalation in terrorist violence in Pakistani cities.

As a consequence, al-Qa`ida decided to expand its area of operations to Pakistan. Part of the new, “regional” strategy was outlined in a document found in bin Ladin’s compound in Abbottabad in 2011. Based on events mentioned in the document, it was likely written in the first half of 2008.^e The author of the document believed that al-Qa`ida’s enemies were “establishing a program that will destroy the jihad center in Waziristan for good” and that al-Qa`ida therefore must “make the control of tribal areas and their defense among

the first priorities.”²⁴ Although al-Zawahiri in 2007 started calling on the Pakistani people to “revolt” against their government, it seems clear that al-Qa`ida’s strategy in Pakistan at this point was purely defensive.²⁵ As outlined in the strategy document, al-Qa`ida wanted to protect its sanctuary in Waziristan, which it viewed, at the time, as a “center for the Global Jihad Movement” and above all, they wanted to avoid a civil war with the Pakistani state, which the document makes clear they knew would be futile.²⁶ Other documents from Abbottabad reveal that bin Ladin was positive to the idea of truce agreements with the Waziristan militias and the Pakistani state in order for the militants to concentrate on fighting in Afghanistan.²⁷

Al-Qa`ida’s primary effort in this period was to work as mediator between the various jihadist groups in the tribal areas of Pakistan. These groups diverged in their priorities, however. Some wanted to carry out attacks on Pakistani security forces or Shi’ite Muslims in Pakistan, while others wanted to use Pakistan as sanctuary and to fight solely inside Afghanistan. The mediation efforts were led by an Egyptian veteran of al-Qa`ida, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, who in May 2007 had been appointed to head “Al-Qa`ida in the Lands of Khurasan [Afghanistan].”²⁸ Al-Qa`ida in the Lands of Khurasan may be viewed as a precursor to AQIS insofar as both entities were responsible for coordinating al-Qa`ida’s activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, Al-Qa`ida in the Lands of Khurasan was led by Arab al-Qa`ida members who also had high positions in al-Qa`ida Central. In contrast, AQIS is led by the Pakistani cleric Asim Umar, who has long experience from Pakistani militant groups but whose formal affiliation with al-Qa`ida appears to be quite recent.²⁹

Mustafa Abu al-Yazid was killed in a drone strike in May 2010 and internal al-Qa`ida documents reveal that al-Qa`ida struggled to find a suitable successor.²⁸ After bin Ladin was killed in May 2011, al-Zawahiri reached out to jihadist circles in Pakistan and managed to recruit Asim Umar, a leading Pakistani jihad ideologue, into al-Qa`ida. Umar was subsequently named head of al-Qa`ida’s new regional branch, AQIS, in 2014, while the Pakistani al-Qa`ida member Umar Farooq was appointed his deputy. Given al-Qa`ida’s limited organizational resources at the time and its considerable “brain drain” of al-Qa`ida operatives to the Middle East (discussed later), it is no surprise that al-Qa`ida decided to “Pakistanize” its branch on the Indian Subcontinent. Another obvious reason to elect a Pakistani cleric was to give the group a more distinct Pakistani identity to boost local recruitment.

There are few available details about Asim Umar’s background, but he is apparently in his mid-forties and has a higher religious education having studied at two of the most famous Deobandi institutions in Pakistan, Jamiat-e-Ulum in Karachi and Dar al-Ulum

c According to Adam Gadahn, AQIS was actually established in mid-2013, but for unspecified reasons the announcement of the group did not happen until 2014. “An Exclusive Interview with Adam Yahye Gadahn,” *Resurgence* 2 (Summer 2015): p. 67; Ayman al-Zawahiri, “I’lan insha far’ jadid li-jama’at qa’idat al-jihad fi shibh al-qara al-hindiyya,” al-Sahab, September 2014, accessed on Internet Archive.

d “Al-Qa`ida Central” in this context refers to al-Qa`ida’s top leadership—al-Zawahiri and his deputies, al-Qaida’s Shura (advisory) Council, and members of al-Qa`ida’s various committees.

e The document mentions the assassination of Benazir Bhutto on December 27, 2007; the Pakistani General Elections on February 18, 2008; and “the current war between Pakistani forces and the tribes of Mahsud,” which may refer to “Operation Zalzal,” an event that started on January 24, 2008, and continued throughout the spring. The author of the document is unknown. “Jihad in Pakistan,” undated, released March 1, 2016, Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

f “Al-Qa`ida in the Lands of Khurasan” should not be confused with the so-called “Khorasan Group,” a group of al-Qa`ida operatives based in Syria. On the appointment of al-Yazid to head of al-Qa`ida in the Lands of Khurasan, see “Interview with Shaykh Mustafa Abu al-Yazid aka ‘Shaykh Saeed,’” al-Sahab, May 2007. Accessed via FFI’s Jihadi Video Database, video no. 504.

g According to a biography of Asim Umar provided by Al Jazeera, Umar was recruited into al-Qa`ida by al-Zawahiri in 2011, ostensibly to strengthen al-Qa`ida after the death of Osama bin Ladin. “Asim umar... min al-tandhir lil-jihad ila qiyatadahu,” Al Jazeera, September 10, 2014.



Nuristan Province, Afghanistan (David Bathgate/Corbis via Getty Images)

Haqqaniyya at Akhora Khattak.^h These institutions constitute networks of Islamists and religious scholars who offer ideological support to the Afghan Taliban, and they have also fostered militant leaders such as Qari Saifullah Akhtar, leader of the Pakistani jihadist group and long-time al-Qa`ida ally Harakat ul-Jihad al-Islami (HUJI). Several of AQIS' members are said to be from the networks of HUJI and other Pakistani jihadist organizations that derive their historical roots from the Afghan-Soviet war in the 1980s and the Kashmir conflict in the 1990s.²⁹

This is not to say that AQIS is merely a new name for Pakistan's old jihadist networks. AQIS represents the most visible effort so far to merge al-Qa`ida's methods and strategies with Pakistan's long traditions of Islamist militancy. There are obviously many challenges: the fragmented nature of Pakistan's militant landscape, the many competing ideological narratives, and Pakistan's omnipresent police and intelligence services. But if al-Qa`ida succeeds, the result could be dangerous.

The potential of AQIS is illustrated by its first terrorist attack—the failed attack on the Pakistani frigate PNS Zulfiqar in Karachi on September 6, 2014. According to AQIS, the plan was to hijack two Pakistani naval vessels and use them to attack U.S. and Indian warships in the Arabian Sea.³⁰ While the attack ultimately failed, the plans were extremely ambitious and reminiscent of al-Qa`i-

da's naval operations off the coast of Yemen in 1999-2002.ⁱ A more worrying detail was the fact that the attackers had succeeded in infiltrating the Pakistani Navy. This was to a large extent confirmed in May 2016 when a Pakistani court sentenced five naval officers to death for their involvement in the plan.³¹

AQIS is not only about spectacular military attacks, however. A large part of AQIS' efforts are a continuation of the work started by Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, which is to unite the efforts of the various militants in the region and to provide training and support to increase the capabilities of local groups.³² The discovery of an AQIS-led training camp in Kandahar is so far the most visible manifestation of these ambitions. It is likely that after the failed attack on PNS Zulfiqar in September 2014, AQIS returned to its core activity, namely local and regional capacity-building.^j

It is not clear how or why AQIS established a presence in Kandahar, the heartland of the Taliban. Until early 2015, AQIS had a considerable presence in the Shawal valley between North and South Waziristan as evidenced by the January 2015 U.S. drone strike there that killed the Pakistani Umar Farooq, the deputy leader of AQIS, along with two Western hostages held by AQIS—American Warren Weinstein and Italian Giovanni Lo Porto.³³ In April 2015, an AQIS spokesman claimed that U.S. drone strikes in Waziristan up until then had killed around 50 AQIS members, including two senior leaders.³⁴

h Furthermore, Asim Umar is described as an "academic" and "among the most prominent thinkers and theorists in the jihadi current." He wrote four books including *The Army of Antichrist*, which denounces American security company Blackwater. "Asim umar... min al-tandhir lil-jihad ila qiyatadahu."

i Al-Qa`ida's maritime campaign outside Yemen included the failed attack on USS The Sullivans in January 2000, the attack on USS Cole in October 2000, and the attack on the oil tanker MV Limburg in October 2002.

j This also included strengthening AQIS' presence in Bangladesh. See Animesh Roul, "How Bangladesh became fertile ground for al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State," *CTC Sentinel* 9:5 (2016): pp. 27-34.

The counterterrorism operations in Shawal were part of a larger campaign by the Pakistani Army that had been ongoing in North Waziristan since June 2014. The operation marked a new departure in the counterterrorism policy of the Pakistan state, which had previously avoided entering North Waziristan with ground troops. Prior to the long anticipated operation, around 600,000 civilians were forced to leave North Waziristan and settle in nearby districts. During this period, a large number of local and foreign militants likely left the province as well. Press reports indicate many of them settled in the neighboring provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Baluchistan, in addition to Afghanistan.³⁵

In this context, the discovery of AQIS elements in southern Kandahar in June 2015 appears to be part of a larger exodus of local and foreign fighters from North Waziristan. It is likely that AQIS' move to southern Afghanistan was motivated by the direct Pakistani military action in Waziristan, which subsequently pushed several militants into Baluchistan and, by extension, Baluch-dominated regions of southern Kandahar. The fact that AQIS went to Kandahar, rather than to more traditional al-Qa`ida sanctuaries in eastern Afghanistan, reinforces the impression that AQIS is a "Pakistani" al-Qa`ida entity, which is distinct from al-Qa`ida's senior leadership and which has closer and more personal ties to Kandahari Taliban leaders in Quetta. Thus, by establishing AQIS as a distinct Pakistani-led branch, al-Qa`ida has managed to widen its support base and activities to become more deeply entrenched in local insurgent movements. This is reflective of a more general strategic shift within al-Qa`ida's senior leadership, which impacts its regional as well as global activities.

Al-Qa`ida's Shift in Strategy

Several drastic events took place during 2011-2014 that directly affected al-Qa`ida's strategic priorities. Bin Ladin was killed; civil wars erupted in the Middle East; and the Islamic State challenged al-Qa`ida's position as leader for the global jihadist movement. In this context, a number of al-Qa`ida operatives relocated to the Middle East to take advantage of opportunities offered by the chaos erupting in the wake of the failed Arab Spring. Some of them were sent from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region; others went to Syria after being released from prison in Iran.³⁶ Al-Qa`ida not only moved personnel but also organizational functions. Around 2013, al-Qa`ida relocated part of its external operations branch, the so-called "Khorasan Group," to Syria and also named the leader of AQAP in Yemen, Nasir al-Wuyaishi, as al-Qa`ida's number two. After al-Wuyaishi was killed in 2015, it appears that the Egyptian veteran al-Qa`ida member Abu Khayr al-Masri has replaced him as al-Zawahiri's deputy. Al-Masri is believed to be based in Syria along with several other core al-Qa`ida members.³⁷

The "brain drain" of senior al-Qa`ida operatives to Syria led to a shift in the center of gravity for al-Qa`ida's strategic leadership, away from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and toward the Arab world. This development is not surprising as al-Zawahiri has always been Arab-centric in his approach.³⁸ For example, in mid-2001, he wrote in a draft version of his autobiography, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, that al-Qa`ida should "... move the battlefield to the heart of the Islamic world," which would help protect the nascent Islamic States in Afghanistan and Chechnya from being exposed to "pressure and strikes."³⁹ After 2001, al-Qa`ida repeatedly sought to establish a presence in the Middle East, most famously by recruiting the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to lead al-Qa`ida's

branch in Iraq (AQI) in 2004.

After the severe weakening of AQI from 2008 onward, the eruption of civil war in Syria created new opportunities for al-Qa`ida. Al-Zawahiri's appointment of the Pakistani scholar Asim Umar to lead AQIS in 2014 seems to confirm that al-Qa`ida had indeed decided to prioritize its now-limited resources on conflicts in the Arab world, while preferring to let local and regional actors like the Taliban and Pakistani jihadis carry on the struggle in Afghanistan.

In recent years, al-Qa`ida has also changed its working methods. Instead of overtly flagging al-Qa`ida's global and anti-American agenda in the context of local insurgencies, al-Qa`ida is now working more covertly, through local proxies. It suits al-Qa`ida's current approach in the Indian Subcontinent, North Africa, and Yemen.⁴⁰ The most recent example is al-Qa`ida's Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, which announced in July 2016 that it had cut off all "external relations" and changed its name to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. It is not known if the statement indicates a real separation from al-Qa`ida, however. Several observers believed it to be a tactical move to gain support with local allies.⁴¹ As already noted, the creation of AQIS was also a move by al-Qa`ida to broaden its local support base. This has been a longstanding priority for al-Zawahiri, who stated in his memoir "the jihad movement must become closer to the masses," a strategic course he has had the opportunity to plot since taking over from bin Ladin.⁴² Given all this, it would seem premature to conclude that al-Qa`ida has become irrelevant or that it is losing ground to localized insurgencies. Instead, al-Qa`ida appears to be more like a chameleon that is constantly adapting to its surroundings and thereby securing its survival.

Future Evolution

What does the future look like for al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan? As argued in this article, AQIS appears for now to be more of a regional than a global threat. This means that in the short- to mid-term, AQIS' priority will likely be to support local insurgencies rather than using the region as a base for international terrorist attacks, which could provoke an intensified international response and more pressure on the Taliban to cut off support. If the Afghan Taliban cuts off all ties to al-Qa`ida, AQIS will be reduced to a marginal actor and this is contrary to its aim of being a unifying force for all jihadist groups in the region. AQIS knows that the Taliban's effort to establish an Islamic state in Afghanistan—rather than al-Qa`ida's "global jihad" against the United States—has greater potential to unite the disparate jihadist groups on the Indian Subcontinent and to rally new recruits to the cause. In the long-term, however, the overall ambition of al-Qa`ida is probably still the same as before, namely to use Afghanistan as a launch pad for militant jihad elsewhere. In other words, al-Qa`ida has not abandoned the idea of "global jihad" from Afghanistan, but it has temporarily chosen to focus on local, territorial struggles.

Al-Qa`ida still very much values its relationship with the Taliban, both for ideological and tactical reasons. Al-Qa`ida sees its alliance with the Taliban as a means to counter the narrative presented by the Islamic State, which claims that it represents the only legitimate 'Islamic State' in the world. Al-Zawahiri has sought to strengthen the legitimacy of the Taliban over the past few years by reiterating his pledge of allegiance to its leadership—Mullah Mansour in 2015 and Mullah Haibatullah in 2016. Al-Zawahiri has further sought to delegitimize Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who in 2014 laid claim to the title of Caliph of all Muslims. Al-Zawahiri

has repeatedly argued that Mullah Omar and his successors have been the only Muslims worthy of holding the title of “Leader of the Faithful,” although he falls short of declaring any of them Caliph. Moreover, in an August 2016 speech, al-Zawahiri explicitly urged all Muslims to rally around the Taliban in Afghanistan rather than the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.⁴³

The Taliban’s relationship with al-Qa`ida is, on the other hand, harder to gauge. What does the Taliban gain from keeping al-Qa`ida in the fold, except perhaps funding and limited battlefield support? What would it take for the Taliban to abandon al-Qa`ida? At present, their relationship seems as strong as ever, but this could change if the Taliban were given the right mixture of carrots and sticks. Obviously, there are no quick fixes to the problem, as illustrated by years of failed peace negotiation efforts. However, it is also important to keep in mind that an agreement with Taliban’s Kandahari leadership would have little effect on the al-Qa`ida presence in remote valleys in places like Kunar or Nuristan hundreds of miles away. Al-Qa`ida would be able to find some sanctuary in Afghanistan, regardless of whether the Taliban abandoned it or not. It seems that a mixture of political solutions and a targeted counter-

terrorism campaign are still the best way to keep Afghanistan from again becoming a major al-Qa`ida safe haven.

While a large part of al-Qa`ida is now focused on taking advantage of opportunities created by the failed Arab Spring, it does not mean that al-Qa`ida has abandoned international terrorism as a tactic. Al-Qa`ida’s international terrorist campaigns were always run by a small, secretive branch within the overall organization. These “external operations” cells comprised no more than a handful of people, and they were not necessarily the most senior or most well-known members of the organization. International terrorist planning may thus happen independently and geographically separate from other traditional al-Qa`ida activities such as training and frontline participation. Both al-Zawahiri and bin Ladin’s son Hamza have continued to call for terrorist attacks against the United States and its Western allies. Whether these terrorist attacks will be staged from Syria, Yemen, or Afghanistan, or carried out by individual al-Qa`ida sympathizers living in the West is not at all clear. And this is perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing the counterterrorism community today. **CTC**

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A Predictable Failure: The Political Economy of the Decline of the Islamic State

By Jacob Shapiro

The Islamic State's failure as a state was predictable as soon as the group's initial advances stalled. The group tried to fight a three-front war for territory—Kurds to the North, the Assad regime to the West, and Iraq to the East—without the necessary resources to do so. Early revenue estimates revealed that either its revenue-generation system was inefficient, its economy had collapsed, or both, and that conditions had steadily worsened over time. The area it controlled in late 2014 was only modestly productive before the war and its governing institutions were inimical to economic growth. These factors guaranteed a slow collapse.

Writing on terrorist groups often begins with a focus on what is unique about a particular group or particular campaign. When a new group emerges, it will typically have some organizational innovation that makes it seem fundamentally different than the groups that came before. After 9/11, many focused on the “networked” nature of the jihadist threat or the particular social dynamics of recruitment into transnational plots.¹ When the Islamic State first emerged as a major policy issue, much of the focus was on its skilled use of social media and frequent use of bloody spectacle. While covering such innovations is a natural thing to do, the focus on novelty can obscure our ability to predict what comes next or to spot the vulnerabilities inherent in innovations.

Theory provides an antidote to this tendency. While each terrorist group is sui generis in some respect, they share commonalities as well. All, for example, face a tradeoff between maximizing security for operatives and maintaining control for leaders. And the vast majority that have fully ceased activity do so either by transitioning

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into political parties (43 percent) or because their key members are killed or captured (40 percent).² Viewing terrorist groups in light of abstract arguments about what makes a group successful or about the inherent limits they face due to organizational dynamics common to all human enterprises can be useful for anticipating how the group in question will develop. Combined with using broader historical trends to gain perspective, bringing theory to bear helps to avoid the trap of assuming that what seems novel today is indeed game changing. Sometimes it is, but more often it is not.

To illustrate this broad point about the value of theory, this piece examines what political economy and simple comparisons would have told us in early 2015 about the Islamic State's future.³ The factual observation underlying the argument presented here is that since the group's remarkable advances in 2014, it has been slowly rolled back, steadily losing territory despite the occasional short-term gain such as the seizure of Palmyra in March 2015, which the government retook a year later. While this rollback is surprising from the perspective of arguments about the Islamic State's potential that were made in the fall of 2014, most of which focused on the group's substantial resources,³ arguably much of what has transpired since could have been inferred from first principles at the time. And it is the predictability of the Islamic State's slow failure that highlights the value of theory. In the Islamic State's case, some comparisons using widely accessible data plus two meta-theories—one about what it takes to fight a conventional war for territory and another from political economy about the institutions required for a productive economy—would have led one to predict the group's stagnation and decline.

Background

The Islamic State first drew significant public attention in early 2014 as it began a stunning advance into Iraq from operating areas in Syria, an advance that would culminate in the June 2014 seizure of Mosul, Iraq's third-largest city. The Islamic State's initial successes were followed by an offensive against the Kurdish city of Erbil and an ethnic cleansing campaign against the Yazidi minority whose broadly televised denouement eventually drew the United States and the international community into deeper involvement in the war.

While the group's emergence in 2014 surprised many, it had deep roots in the region. The Islamic State is the successor of al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which the Iraqi government, the United States, and their allies have fought since at least 2004.⁴ From 2006 through 2009 ISI was routed from most of

a The author first made many of this article's arguments in print in Jamie Hansen-Lewis and Jacob N. Shapiro, “Understanding the Daesh Economy,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, which was published in the fall of 2015. The first outline of that piece is dated May 25, 2015.

Iraq by a combination of local Sunni militias, coalition forces led by the United States, and Iraqi security forces. As described in detail elsewhere, the group withdrew into a limited terrorist campaign in northern Iraq by mid-2009 and maintained a clandestine network in the Mosul area of Ninewa province. That network conducted a sustained terrorist campaign in Baghdad and other major cities as well as a targeted assassination campaign against its former enemies in Anbar and Ninewa provinces.⁵

As the Syrian civil war picked up in 2011 ISI sent fighters into Syria under the banner of Jabhat al-Nusra. Differences over strategy, tactics, and goals between the ISI leaders in Iraq and those guiding Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria led to a split. In April 2013 ISI began operating on its own in Syria and changed its name to the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS.^b

Antigovernment protests in Iraq's Anbar province from January 2013 to December 2013 were met by a repressive government response, creating a political opening for the group to return to Iraq. Beginning in late December, the Islamic State expanded back into Iraq with the support of some local political organizations—including many of the same tribal organizations that had fought against it in 2006—and quickly overwhelmed Iraqi Army outposts in the major cities of Anbar. Following the Iraqi Army's precipitous retreat from Mosul in June 2014, the group renamed itself the Islamic State.

The Value of Comparison

One way to think about the Islamic State's administrative competence and its financial prospect is to ask a simple question. Given the reported level of revenue and the best estimates we can come up with of economic activity and population in the area that became part of the "caliphate," just before their territorial takeover, has it done a good job of maintaining an economy, raising taxes, and attracting the population necessary to fight a war over territory? On the revenue side the U.S. Department of the Treasury estimated that in 2015, the Islamic State made approximately \$1 billion dollars in total revenue, which came equally from tax revenues and oil sales.⁶ Estimates for the first quarter of 2016 based on press reporting and events in Iraq and Syria suggest a significant drop in revenue to something under \$700 million a year,⁷ with a further decline to about \$440 million a year in July.⁸ While Treasury officials have routinely noted how difficult it is to come up with reliable figures,⁹ they have no incentive to systematically underestimate the group's revenue; political risk would arise from making estimates that are too small. These figures can therefore be seen as a reasonable starting point. Other estimates of tax revenues are as high as \$800 million in 2015.^c

While they may seem large, these figures imply either an economy that has completely collapsed, an incompetent tax collection system, massive population outflows, or some combination of the three.¹⁰ This can be seen by comparing various revenue numbers to



Screen capture from video released by al-Hayat in August 2015 entitled "Rise of the Caliphate and the Return of the Gold Dinar"

estimates of population and of pre-war^d economic activity.

Combining the various publicly available maps estimating the regions the Islamic State controlled in 2015 with the two credible, scientifically validated sources of highly localized population estimates suggests that areas where the Islamic State can tax had a pre-war population of 2.8 million–5.3 million people.^e The larger number assumes the group can tax in all areas where it has a substantial presence, while the smaller number assumes it can only do so in core territories.

Since the territory the group controls is not part of states that reliable reported sub-national productivity numbers, one can estimate pre-war GDP of the maximal definition of taxable Islamic State territory in two ways. First, one can use G-Econ, a widely-used geospatial database of economic activity that estimated economic activity in 1990 for each one degree by one degree grid cell of the globe, roughly 110-kilometer-by-90-kilometer cells in the Middle East.^f If we assume productivity increases were constant across countries, which is clearly not precise and likely overestimates this region's productivity as neither Iraq nor Syria notably outperformed world averages from 1990–2012, then we can assess the pre-war GDP of the Islamic State's area by comparing the area to others that were close to its level in 1990.^g The closest two countries in rank in G-Econ are Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire, which had 2013 GDPs of \$30 billion and \$31 billion, respectively. Another way to

b The group was also referred to as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

c This higher number is 33 percent of the \$2.435 billion reported as "extortion" income in Jean-Charles Brisard and Damien Martinez, "ISIS Financing 2015," Center for the Analysis of Terrorism, 2016. If one accepts such estimates, then rationalizing the reported numbers does not require one to think the economic collapse is quite as bad, the taxation quite so poor, or the population loss so great.

d The ideal date to use for pre-war economic activity is not obvious. In Iraq the shift to full-scale conflict did not happen until 2014. In Syria 2011 was the last year of relative normality in areas currently under Islamic State control. The author uses 2013 GDP figures here, but the results are not particularly sensitive to the year.

e These two sources, WorldPop and LandScan, combine census data with satellite imagery to estimate population numbers for every 800-mile-by-800-mile parcel of land on Earth. Both provide similar estimates for Islamic State territory.

f G-Econ provides a single snapshot in time of economic activity based on administrative data for 1990 and various other sources. It has not been recalculated for other years and so cannot be used to contrast the current economic situation with the state of the economy in the "caliphate" area before the international coalition launched operations against the Islamic State. On G-Econ, see Nordhaus, William, Qazi Adam, David Corderi, Kyle Hood, Nadejda Makarova Victor, Mukhtar Mohammed, Alexandra Miltner, and Jyldyz Weiss, "The G-Econ Database on Gridded Output: Methods and Data," Yale University, 2006.

g Such an overestimate would inflate the level of collapse, but the fact the luminosity measure produces a higher GDP figure mitigates this concern.



Screen capture from video released by Wilayat Kirkuk in August 2016 entitled “And He Causes Charitable Deeds to Prosper”

assess pre-war economic activity in Islamic State territory is to use total nighttime illumination of the area it controls as measured from space as a proxy for economic activity.^h Luminosity in 2012 for territory subsequently seized by the Islamic State was comparable to that of Ghana and Uruguay in that year, which had 2013 GDPs of \$48.1 billion and \$55.7 billion, respectively. Thus, we have pre-war GDP estimates ranging from \$30 billion to \$56 billion for a territory holding 5.3 million people. This corresponds to pre-war GDP per capita of the area between \$2,021 and \$3,774 depending on whether we choose the G-Econ or nightlight-based estimate.

Unfortunately, one cannot use direct measurement to assess how the economy has likely changed during the war. Luminosity clearly dropped as the war in Syria progressed and the lights basically went out in Iraq after the Islamic State took over.¹¹ But the observed drop is a function both of economic woes and of the failure of the electricity grid, and we cannot take it as a clean indicator of economic collapse.

Instead, the best way to think about how the economy is doing in Islamic State areas is to compare pre-war GDP to current revenue estimates and ask what that would indicate about the group and the economy in areas it controls. As already noted, the U.S. Treasury estimated \$500 million in tax revenue for the group in 2015. Start by assuming the group is average at taxation. The world median tax-to-GDP ratio is 17 percent. Thus, if the Islamic State is as effective at taxing the economy as a “normal” country and if no one moved out, then \$500 million in taxation income would imply a per-capita GDP of \$554–\$1,050 in 2015 depending whether we assume the group is taxing a large or small area. That number represents a massive economic collapse.

Alternatively, if we assume the economy of the areas it controls has only shrunk by half, then the Islamic State is only achieving a tax-to-GDP ratio of 6.3 percent, meaning that it has an incompetent taxation system. Or if one assumes the group can tax at the world median and that GDP per-capita remains in the \$3,000/year range (a figure between the two pre-war estimates), then \$500 million in 2015 revenue implies a taxable population of only 980,400

people.

Put more starkly and as stated earlier, either the Islamic State is failing to tax, suffering economic collapse, facing massive population flight, or some combination of the three.ⁱ Either way, placing early revenue estimates into comparative perspective would have clearly indicated that the Islamic State was not on a path to building up an administratively competent state. This should not have been surprising; the group was starting from scratch, taking over already economically ravaged populations in an active war zone, and facing regular attacks on its personnel. Given the group’s goals of territorial conquest, however, those predictable failures should have clearly indicated how limited the Islamic State’s prospects were from the start.

Predicting the Islamic State’s Collapse

In late 2014 there were a few ways to think about the Islamic State. One way was as a terrorist group that had survived a long period underground and then achieved territorial control beyond anything prior jihadist groups have managed. Another was as a fledgling state trying to fight a three-front war (Iraq to the east, the Kurds to the north, and Syria and other insurgents to the west). Thinking about the group as the latter would have led to stark conclusions about its prospects given two simple meta-theories—one about what it takes to fight a conventional war for territory and another about the institutions required for a productive economy.

The meta-theory about what it takes to fight a conventional war for territory is a simple one. Creating combat power requires revenue because ammunition, equipment, and fuel cost money. While terrorism can be carried out on the cheap, holding territory is costly. And the Islamic State did not have the option of guerilla warfare; the territory it occupied was unsuitable to that approach. And if sustaining combat power requires a reliable source of revenue, then any group would be expected to fail unless it had stable outside funding, a viable tax base, or the ability to generate sustained revenues from natural resources.

While there is clear evidence that external support can enable rebel groups to stand against state forces for long periods,¹² there is little evidence that the Islamic State has any major outside sponsors and the group’s own doctrine argues against reliance on external donors.¹³ And when it comes to the tax base, a second meta-theory comes into play that would predict failure for the group. Over the last two decades, the field of political economy has come to a broad consensus about the political and economic institutions required for fostering economic growth.^j In particular, strong property rights,¹⁴ predictable taxation,¹⁵ functioning credit markets,¹⁶ and a clear regulatory framework are all necessary for economies to thrive. Unpredictable autocratic regimes typically suffer terrible

^h This analysis uses 2012 data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) National Center for Environmental Information (NECI) Version 4 Defense Meteorological Satellite Program’s Operational Linescan System Nighttime Lights Time Series (DMSP-OLS). These are the standard sources for stable nighttime illumination from satellites.

ⁱ Critically, though, using larger estimates would not substantially change the conclusions here. Even at the \$800M in 2015 tax revenue the Islamic State would be taxing its territory at well less than 10 percent of any reasonable estimate of pre-war GDP. Again, it is either incompetent at raising revenue or its economy has collapsed or its population has fled or a combination of all three. None bodes well for long-run success.

^j For a historically informed summary of the consensus, see Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Crown Business, 2012), especially chapter 3. The key point is that growth under extractive institutions is possible for a short period but not over the long-run.

economies, and states with high and unpredictable tax rates typically see their economies crumble over time.^k

By early 2015 there was extensive reporting on the low quality of the Islamic State's governing institutions and on the capricious nature of its regulatory and tax institutions.¹⁷ And by late 2015 reporting was widespread that the economy was in terrible shape.¹⁸ Given the theory about what was required in the abstract for an economy to be successful, it was foreseeable that the economy under the Islamic State's control would fail over time, as it has.¹ Some posited that oil extraction could solve this shortfall. Others noted that the group's oil infrastructure was inherently vulnerable to attack from the air, that it had to sell at a steep discount to world market prices, and that it likely lacked the ability to maintain fields for the long run.¹⁹ These arguments implied that over the long run the group could not make up its tax shortfalls with oil production.²⁰ And while there are examples of dictatorial regimes around the world that have survived for decades, none have been fighting three-front wars.^m

Even assuming away economic collapse, simple data-driven comparisons to other states in late 2014 boded poorly for the group.²¹ The Islamic State's territory guaranteed that it would be a poor state compared to the ones it was fighting; in 2012 the nighttime illumination of territories it controlled at its peak amounted to no more than one-third of that in the rest of Syria and one-eighth of the rest of Iraq.ⁿ So what do we see if we assume the Islamic State would transform the economic activity it did have into military spending at rates similar to comparably sized states? Worldwide defense expenditures in 2014 peaked at 10.2 percent of GDP in South Sudan, with many conflict-affected countries only managing to spend 3 percent of GDP on defense.²² Assuming the Islamic State's territory would maintain its pre-war GDP of approximately \$30 billion, which was unlikely for the reasons given above, then defense expenditures observed elsewhere suggested the group could support military spending in the \$900 million-\$3 billion/year range. While we know now that it achieved nothing like that, even those numbers were tiny compared to Iraq's 2014 spending of \$9.5 billion, Turkey's \$20 billion, UAE's \$22.6 billion, or Saudi Arabia's \$80 billion, let alone the \$8 billion in U.S. spending on the Islamic State campaign to date. While military spending does not translate directly into military power, the gap between what is

financially feasible for the Islamic State over the long-run and what its neighbors spend would have led one to predict failure.

What Comes Next?

It would be tempting to think that the predictable economic dysfunction of the Islamic State would lead to collapse from within. That need not happen. The populations in Sunni areas under its control are extremely resilient. For more than a decade these populations have survived in a war economy. They have presumably developed a high toleration for economic pain as well as robust coping mechanisms. The history of Iraqi government mistreatment in 2013, Islamic State success in playing the sectarian card, and the group's brutal repression of dissent means that economic misfortune is not necessarily going to translate (at least in the short- to medium-term) into political collapse.^o But it will mean a steady degradation of combat power, one that cannot be compensated for with the capture of enemy equipment over the long run. Gear captured on the battlefield does not come with spare parts, much less the expertise required to maintain it, meaning that its value will steadily degrade with time, as it already has.

But the observation that the Islamic State will continue to steadily decline highlights an inherent limitation of theory in thinking about threats like the Islamic State. While political economy and some simple comparisons would have told us that the group was doomed to eventually fail—the economy it had to draw on was too small and its institutions inadequate given the task it set by fighting such a broad war—they are of little help in thinking about specific timing. The fact that the group is on the glide path to decline and collapse does not tell us when it will fail. Theory and comparison could have predicted the Islamic State was unlikely to be sustainable, but it did not tell us how long it would take to fail or what the final triggering event would be for the group's territorial collapse.

Conclusion

Simple comparisons plus a bit of basic political economy could have predicted that the Islamic State would fail once its initial drive into Iraq stalled at the borders of the country's Sunni-majority region. The broad lesson from this example is that estimates of groups' potential should not eschew broad macro-theory. Rather, such a theory can help keep the terrorist threat in perspective.

And this last point is critical because as the Islamic State is driven back, history suggests we should expect increased terrorist attacks outside of the Middle East as the core of dedicated activists looks for ways to continue the fight despite losing territory. Many rebel groups shift into terrorism as their territorial ambitions are stymied. Indeed, in an earlier incarnation, the Islamic State did exactly that. And after the end of the Afghan jihad, foreign fighters looking for new struggles created new groups targeting other countries, including the United States. But just because a terrorist threat can carry out periodic attacks does not mean it can take and hold territory or foment revolution. Few terrorist groups succeed in doing so, and there is little theoretical reason to expect the Islamic State will be different. **CTC**

k Zimbabwe is an excellent example of a potentially rich state destroyed by poor governance.

l It is difficult to evaluate how the Islamic State's governance would have performed absent significant external pressure (e.g. airstrikes destroying both infrastructure, cash, and people as well as pressure on Turkey to tighten its borders against smuggling), which would have made it hard for even a legitimate and capable government to function. The broad empirical record suggests the Islamic State would have done poorly even absent those pressures. They likely sped up a process of immiseration that would have taken place in any case.

m Poor economic governance has proven survivable, but note that none of the regimes that survived it were routinely violating the Westphalian norm of sovereignty by attacking their neighbors and exporting terrorism around the world. Such actions rules out the kind of neglect by the international community that allows extremely low-quality rulers to survive over long periods.

n These numbers are based on aggregating illumination from grid squares the Islamic State currently controls in the DMSP-OLS data and comparing that to aggregated illumination in other areas of Iraq.

o Moreover, economic conditions are poor in areas of Iraq and Syria not under Islamic State control, and so residents comparing their economic welfare to that of neighbors in government-controlled areas may not be as inclined to rebel as they would be if those areas were doing better.

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